10¢

EVERY STORY AN ACE

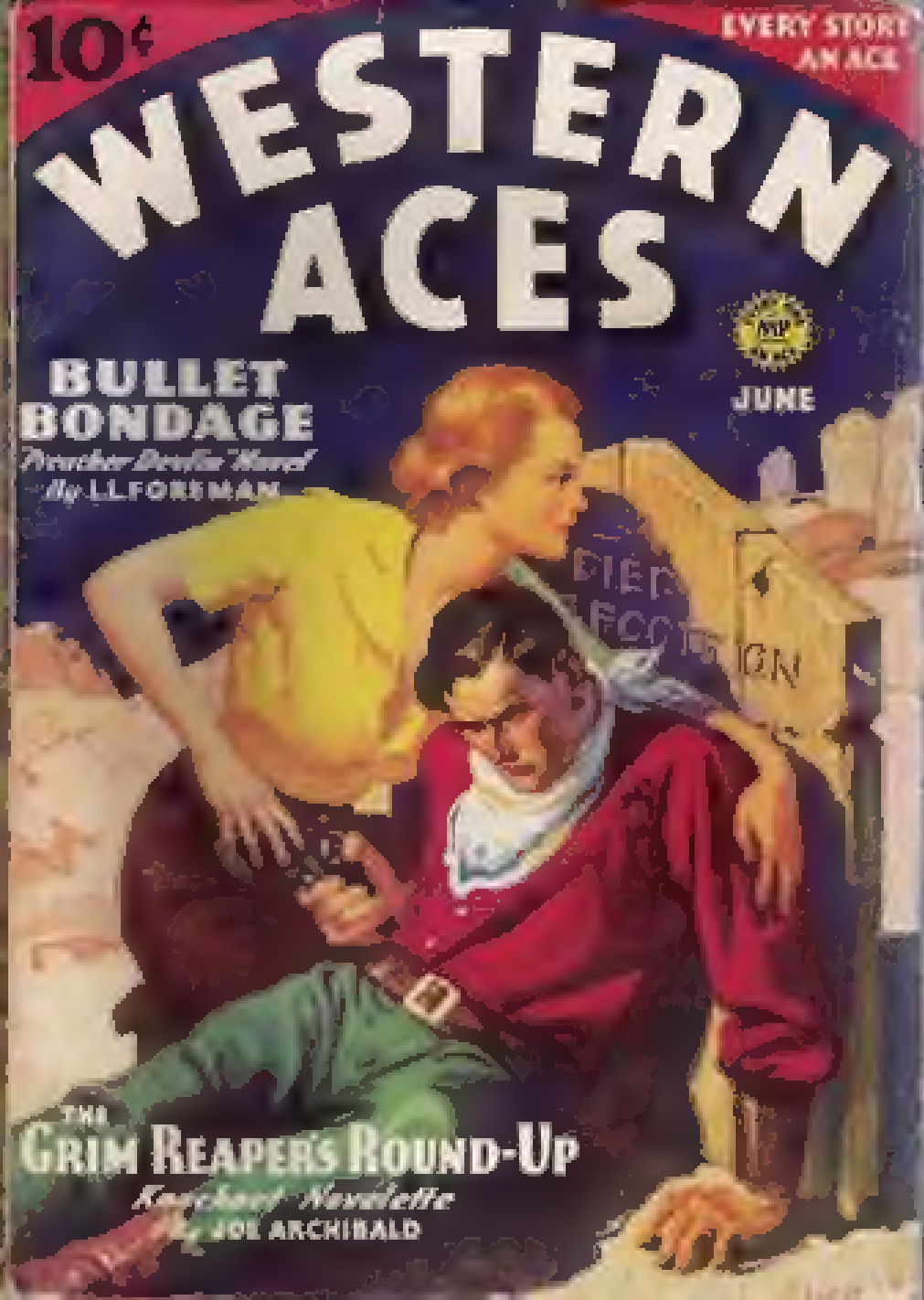
WESTERN ACES

JUNE

BULLET BONDAGE

Preacher Devlin Novel

By L. L. FOREMAN



THE GRIM REAPER'S ROUND-UP

Knockout Novelette

By JOE ARCHIBALD

OLD MONEY WANTED

WE PAY THE WORLD'S HIGHEST PRICES

DON CORRADO ROMANO
founder of
ROMANO'S COIN SHOP

UP TO $5000.00 EACH

Amazing Profits For Those Who Know OLD MONEY!

Big Cash Premiums

FOR HUNDREDS OF COINS NOW CIRCULATING

There are literally thousands of old coins and bills that we want at once and for which we will pay big cash premiums. Many of these coins are now passing from hand to hand in circulation. Today or tomorrow a valuable coin may come into your possession. Watch your change. Know what to look for.

Don't sell your coins, encased postage stamps, or paper money to any other dealer until you have first seen the prices that we will pay for them.

WE WILL PAY FOR 1909 CENTS UP TO $10.00 EACH

1860 Cents **$50.00** — Cents of 1861, 1864, 1865, 1869, 1870, 1881, 1890, **$20.00** each—Half Cents **$250.00**—Large Copper Cents **$2000.00**—Flying Eagle Cents **$20.00**—Half Dimes **$150.00**—20c Pieces **$100.00**—25c before 1873, **$300.00**—50c before 1879, **$750.00** — Silver Dollars before 1874, **$2500.00** — Trade Dollars **$250.00** — Gold Dollars **$1000.00** — $2.50 Gold Pieces before 1876, **$600.00** — $3 Gold Pieces **$1000.00** — $5 Gold Pieces before 1888, **$5000.00** — $10 Gold Pieces before 1908, **$150.00** — Commemorative Half Dollars **$6.00**—Commemorative Gold Coins **$115.00.**

PAPER MONEY — Fractional Currency **$26.00.** Confederate Bills **$15.00.** Encased Postage Stamps **$12.00.**

FOREIGN COINS—Certain Copper or Silver Coins $15.00. Gold Coins $150.00, etc.

Don't Wait! Send Dime Today for Our Large Illustrated List Before Sending Coins

Address your envelope to:

ROMANO'S COIN SHOP
Dept. 559 **Springfield, Mass.**

CUT FILL OUT AND MAIL TODAY!

ROMANO'S COIN SHOP, Dept. 559
Springfield, Mass.

Gentlemen: Please send me your large illustrated list for which I enclose 10c in cash carefully wrapped.
(Please print plainly.)

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

WESTERN ACES

A. A. WYN, Editor

Vol. 5 JUNE, 1936 No. 4

GRIPPING WESTERN NOVEL

GUN WAIF ..... **W. Ryerson Johnson** 6

Little Gulcher Gleeson had been reared for murder. And he had one last chance to make good on his gunhawk pledge—the chance to kill the father of the girl he loved.

TWO STIRRING NOVELETTES

BULLET BONDAGE ..... **L. L. Foreman** 38

Destiny shackled Preacher Devlin with the love of a pretty girl. But death was easier to meet than the loss of his freedom. And the one trail out led through the gunfire of kill-crazy bounty hunters.

THE GRIM REAPER'S ROUNDUP ..... **Joe Archibald** 83

A lead-fanged decoy baited Larry Elver on to heartbreak and tragedy. For the gun ghost's treachery blasted the girl he loved into a life of misery beyond the law.

FIVE ACE WESTERN SHORT STORIES

INVITATION TO THE NOOSE ..... **Orlando Rigoni** 29

Young Dean had a hair-trigger temper. And this temper brought six-gun disaster and heartbreak to a beautiful girl.

TRIGGER GAMBLE ..... **Peter Germane** 63

When Jim Stover joined Sevren's longriders, he challenged his gun magic against trigger treachery.

BLOOD OF A LAWMAN ..... **Gunnison Steele** 75

Big John Blair could not escape the lawman's legacy that flung him against the empty gun of a greed-mad killer.

POWDERSMOKE PLEDGE ..... **James Clyde Harper** 104

The law branded Jim Mason—the Tarantula. For his bitter mission was to right an ancient wrong—by death.

HELL IN HORSE HEAVEN ..... **Eric Thane** 114

Hell popped loose in the horse country. For Terreton had never seen a girl like Tara—and Tara raised cows.

THE M-P NEWS FLASH 37

Cover by M. Luros

Published monthly by Magazine Publishers, Inc., 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y. A. A. Wyn, President. Entered as second-class matter October 25, 1934, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered at U. S. Patent Office.

Copyright, 1936, by Magazine Publishers, Inc.

Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Magazine Publishers Group, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

Twelve Issues, $1.00; Single Copies, Ten Cents

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

The man who has directed the Home-Study Training of more men for the Radio industry than any other man in America.

MAIL THE COUPON NOW. Get the facts about Radio—the field with a future. N. R. I. Training fits you for jobs in connection with the manufacture, sale and operation of Radio equipment. It fits you to go in business for yourself, service sets, operate on board ships, in broadcasting, television, aviation, police Radio and many other opportunities. My FREE book tells how I train you quickly at home in spare time to be a Radio Expert.

Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Why struggle along in a dull job with low pay and no future? Start training now for the live-wire Radio field. I have helped many men make more money. Hundreds of successful men now in Radio got their start through N. R. I. Training.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Hold your job. I'll not only train you in a few hours of your spare time a week, but the day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which quickly show you how to do Radio repair jobs common in most every neighborhood. I give you Radio Equipment for conducting experiments and making tests that teach you to build and service practically every type of receiving set. James R. Ritz, 3525 Chapline Street, Wheeling, W. Va., writes: "During my training, my spare time earnings netted me an average of $1,000 to $1,500 yearly."

Find Out What Radio Offers

My book has shown hundreds of fellows how to make more money and win success. It's FREE to any ambitious fellow over 15 years of age. Investigate. Find out what Radio offers you. Read what my graduates are doing and making, about my Money Back Agreement, and the many other N. R. I. features. Mail the coupon in an envelope, or paste it on a 1c post card TODAY.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6FA8
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

HERE'S PROOF that my training pays

$3,200 In 1 Year
"My books show that for the year 1933 I ran $3,200. Radio service doesn't come too tough for me now. You know who taught me Radio?—N. R. I." J. P. WILON, Box 48, Westville, Okla.

More Work Than He Can Do
"At times I have more work than I can do and I also sell quite a few new Radios. I average $400 to $500 profit a year in my spare time. I can always make a good living or better, in Radio, thanks to the N. R. I. Course."—GORDON ANGWIN, 1815 Barrett Ave., Richmond, Calif.

Picked Up $1,800 While Studying
"My opinion of the N.R.I. course is that it is the best I have had at any price. I picked up $1,800 while studying, and I call that good money—the time I gave my Radio work did not interfere with my other business."—OTIS DENTON, 14105 Lorain Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio.

MAIL THIS NOW

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6FA8
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your book which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. **(Please Write Plainly.)**

NAME..... AGE.....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

Who'll Pay You $30 a week

—while you are sick or accidentally disabled?

Now—Only About 3c a Day Covers ALL SICKNESS, and ACCIDENTS

What would happen to your family if you were laid up because of sickness or accident? Would your salary continue indefinitely? Have you enough money saved to pay food bills, rent, medical expenses?

Face this situation now before it faces you! Only about 3c a day—the price of a newspaper—will take that gnawing worry off your mind—and save your family from privation or humiliating charity! Send coupon below and learn about the amazing new **all sickness and accident policy** issued by Travelers Casualty Insurance Co. Read at the right the complete list of benefits paid by this great all-coverage policy. NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION needed. Open to men, women and children, 10 to 70 years.

Imagine Such Liberal Protection For Only $1 A Month

Pays up to: $1,000.00 for accidental death; $30 weekly while confined in hospital either for sickness or accident; $20 weekly while sick or hurt at home; $1,000.00 for loss of eyes, hands or feet; $500.00 for either hand or foot; $250.00 for either eye; $100.00 funeral benefit. Also pays liberal benefits for dislocations fractures, broken bones, etc.

SEND NO MONEY! Fill in and mail coupon below and this liberal policy will be mailed you for FREE EXAMINATION. One moment of decision now may save you a lifetime of regret. Tear out this coupon now.

TRAVELERS CASUALTY INSURANCE COMPANY

Organized Under Illinois Insurance Laws

Dept. 109, 166 W. Jackson Blvd., Chicago, Illinois

FREE EXAMINATION

TRAVELERS CASUALTY INSURANCE CO.
Dept. 109, 166 W. Jackson Blvd.,
Chicago, Ill.

Send me free of cost or obligation a sample Travelers Policy.

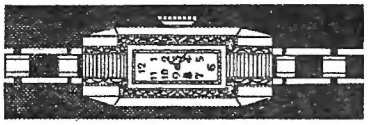
My Name..... Age.....

Street .....

City..... State.....

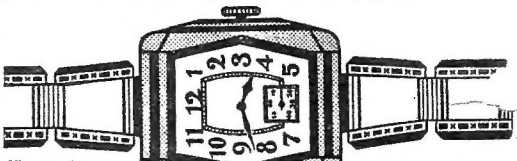
Name of Beneficiary.....

Relationship to me.....



50¢ A WEEK

Latest Popular Baguette Wrist Watch or Modern Man's Wrist Watch. Beautifully engraved and chased. Chromium finished link bracelet to match. Tested and regulated movements. Guaranteed perfect time-keeping and satisfactory service. Free material for two years.



Man's Ring **Lady's Ring**

Exquisitely designed Lady's solitaire Ring or Gorgeous Man's Ring. Beautifully chased. Set with a facet cut Simulated Diamond of dazzling radiance and blazing blue white fire. Simulated Diamonds are pure white, 24 facet cut, glitter with sparkling brilliancy and shining fire. You will be amazed with its similarity of a perfect cut, flawless, genuine diamond costing hundreds of dollars.

To advertise our Simulated Diamond Rings, we will give the above described Ladies' fashionable Baguette Wrist Watch or Modern Man's Wrist Watch, on each ring purchased from us and paid on our most liberal, easy weekly payment plan.

Send only name and address. No papers to sign, no reference required, no red tape. Just state size of ring or send a strip of paper for measure. On arrival pay postman $2.00 down. After that you send us 50c a week, full price only $9.95. The watch will not cost you anything on this offer. The price you pay is for the ring only and you get the watch without extra cost. Act now! **Mention watch and ring wanted and give ring size.**

FASHION JEWELRY CO., 154 NASSAU ST. Dept. 151, New York

PROSTATE SUFFERERS

Prostate gland acute or chronic, rheumatism, kidney and bladder sufferers, send for free trial package, amazing results. Endorsed by doctors.

PROSTEX COMPANY, Dept. 73, Miami, Oklahoma

LONESOME?

Let me arrange a romantic correspondence for you. Find yourself a sweetheart thru America's foremost select social correspondence club. A friendship letter society for lonely ladies and gentlemen. Members everywhere; CONFIDENTIAL introductions by letter; efficient, dignified and continuous service. I have made thousands of lonely people happy—why not you? Write for FREE sealed particulars.

EVAN MOORE P. O. BOX 988 JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

STOP Your Rupture Worries!

C. E. Brooks, Inventor

Why worry and suffer any longer? Learn about our perfected invention for all forms of reducible rupture. Automatic air cushion acting as an agent to assist Nature has brought happiness to thousands. **Permits natural strengthening of the weakened muscles.** Weighs but a few ounces, is inconspicuous and sanitary. No obnoxious springs or hard pads. No salves or plasters. Durable, cheap. **Sent on trial to prove it.** Beware of imitations. Never sold in stores or by agents. Write today for full information, sent free in plain envelope. All correspondence confidential.

BROOKS COMPANY, 167D State St., Marshall, Mich.

To make 50,000 NEW Friends!

These Astounding Genuine Jewelry Values Sent-NO MONEY DOWN!

That's exactly what we mean! No Money Down — Not one cent in advance — No C. O. D. to pay on arrival! All we ask you to do is to examine any of these values for TEN DAYS at our expense. After full free inspection, if you agree with us that our style and quality values challenge duplication by cash or credit jewelers anywhere, take

10 MONTHS to PAY

Royal offers you the most liberal credit terms without any embarrassment! **No red tape — No direct inquiries — No interest or extras.** Just send us your name and address and a few personal facts such as age, occupation, etc. (if possible mention 1 or 2 business references:) All dealings strictly confidential. After 10 DAYS FREE TRIAL — pay the 10 equal, easy monthly payments, stated under each article, without further obligation.

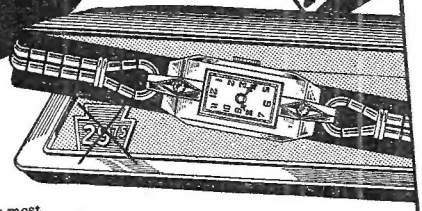
Written GUARANTEE

Your satisfaction is always assured when you buy at Royal. A written guarantee — fully backed by ROYAL — **America's Largest Mail Credit Jewelers** — accompanies every ring or watch purchased from us giving you absolute protection.

Send for FREE CATOLOG

New 32 page "BOOK OF GEMS"

Hundreds of special values in genuine blue-white diamonds, standard watches, fine jewelry, silverware, cameras, radios and gift novelties. Each fully described and pictured. **Adults send for your copy to-day!**

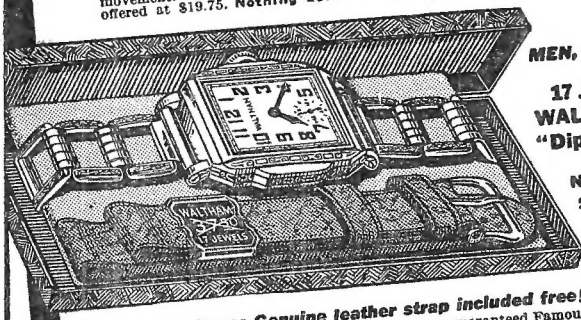


2 Diamond BAGUETTE

Now only $19.75

$1.98 a month

LC-1. . . Now at our most liberal terms! Elegantly styled, modern, genuine Baguette wrist watch at an amazingly low price. The streamlined white, lifetime case is set with 2 brilliant, genuine diamonds and fitted with a fully guaranteed and dependable movement. Smart, link bracelet to match. $29.75 value specially offered at $19.75. **Nothing down — Only $1.98 a month.**



MEN, Look!!

17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat"

Now only $24.75

Handsome Genuine leather strap included free!

LC-2 . . . Where could you duplicate this? Factory guaranteed Famous 17 Jewel WALTHAM "Diplomat" — offered at a sensationally low price. Permanent white case, richly engraved and correct in every detail. Fitted with link bracelet to match and smart, new extra leather strap. By special permission ROYAL now offers this $37.50 value, complete for only $24.75. **No Money Down — only $2.48 a month.**

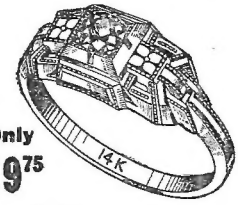
NO DEPOSIT-NO C.O.D.-10 MONTHS to PAY!

Only $27.85 for Both

$2.79 a month

5 Diamonds

LC-3 . . . "LADY DIANE" DUO — exquisitely matched engagement and wedding ring ensemble of beautifully engraved 14K Solid White Gold. The specially selected, dazzling genuine blue-white center diamond in the engagement ring is made even more beautiful by the two brilliant diamonds on each side; the wedding ring is exquisitely engraved to match. **No Money Down—Only $2.79 a month for both complete.**



Only $19.75

$1.98 a month

LC-4 . . . A smart, modern, square prong engagement ring of high quality at an amazingly low price. The fiery, brilliant genuine blue-white diamond is set in a richly hand engraved and milgrained ring of 14K Solid White Gold. Specially priced at $19.75—During this special "new customer" drive our terms are: **Nothing Down—Only $1.98 a mo.**

17 Jewel WALTHAM Outfit

Complete $19.75

LC-6 . . . Another famous WALTHAM—one of America's greatest watches at a sensationally low price! Handsomely engraved 12 size white lifetime case; factory guaranteed, accurate and dependable 17 Jewel WALTHAM movement; complete with engraved knife and chain to match. ALL for $19.75 — **No Money Down — only $1.98 a month.**

ROYAL DIAMOND & WATCH CO. INC.

Established 1895

Address - DEPT. 154-H

170 BROADWAY N.Y.C.

America's Largest Mail Order Credit Jewelers

Gun Waif

Little Gulcher Gleeson was a trigger-swift kid who had been reared for murder. Yet his bullet baptism showed that he hadn't learned the catechism of kill. But he got another chance to prove his pledge to the gun-hawk's creed—the chance to burn down the father of the girl he loved.

Little Gulcher started blazing.

Gripping Novel

By W. RYERSON JOHNSON

CHAPTER I

Bullet Baptism

HIGH in the Malpais Hills, the Hawk's Roost hideout tremored to six-gun roar. Little Gulcher was chucking his morning quota of lead. Six times the youngster threw down with a hogleg longer than his forearm. Lead from the first shot splayed hit-or-miss against the side of a boulder. There was nothing careless about the next five shots.

Little Gulcher piled them all on top of the first.

Hack Blont swapped glances with "Dog-town" Arata.

"The kid's shootin' where he's lookin'," Hack said.

Little Gulcher, slim, wiry, blue eyed, freckle-faced, with hair the color of new rope, looked up excitedly.

"Means I ride with you tonight, huh?"

The outlaw hedged. "Your old man's roddin' this outfit. We'll see what he says."

"He said first time I put 'em all in the same place, I could ride with you!"

Dog-town Arata, a wolf-lean *mestizo* renegade from south of the border, stood up and stretched. His hand waved out.

"The Gulcher, he comes now. We ask heem."

"Gulcher" Gleeson came on with a rolling, truculent gait, and paused, rocking on his high-heeled boots. He was a big man, the Gulcher, with massive shoulders, like a grizzly's. Head like a grizzly's, too—chunky; with little black eyes, deep buried, and strong teeth showing through lips too thin to cover them easily.

He had strung with a wild bunch for more years than he could remember. His slabby face decorated reward posters in four states. He had no conscience and a lot of cunning. His gunhand kept him alive. He could shoot like a demon out of hell —from the front if necessary. But he preferred to line out his lead from behind. It was how he had got his name—Gulcher Gleeson.

He stood looking at the gun lead thickly glazing the side of the boulder.

"You notice it's all in one place," Hack Blont said. "And it's six shots."

The Gulcher grunted. His little eyes bored at the youngster who had reloaded and was standing, grinning a little nervously. In appearance there wasn't much in common between these two, Gulcher and Little Gulcher, and yet they called each other father and son.

"YOU'RE shootin' straight enough," the Gulcher growled. "How quick are you?"

"He's quicker'n any of us, chief," Hack Blont said.

"All except you, *señor*," Dog-town Arata purred.

The Gulcher scowled at the boy. "Let's see you draw agin' me."

The lad gulped. "An' shoot?"

"Sure. If you can. Go on—draw."

The Gulcher's lips were drawn in a thin, cruel line against his teeth as he watched the boy. Little Gulcher blurred into motion. His thin body crouched, wiry shoulders hunched, clawed fingers slapped gun butt. Steel cleared leather. It was all one flowing movement. Little Gulcher could draw.

But fast as he was, big Gulcher was faster. The outlaw jabbed at his gun, elbow stiff, fingers open. It didn't seem that he pulled a gun from holster and aimed. In a swoop of arm motion, he seemed to point a finger, that was all. His six-gun blared on the mountain air. The bullet slapped against Little Gulcher's half-drawn weapon and tore it from his hand.

The boy stood there with a frightened look on his face. He let his arm stay where it was, elbow high, hand dangling. The hand was numb from concussion shock. He was afraid to look at it. There might be fingers missing. He thought he could hear blood dripping onto the ground.

Hack Blont broke the horrible silence. Hack was a big man too, a gunhawk killer. But not quite so big or black of heart as the Gulcher.

"Hell," Hack said, "you mighta shot away half the kid's hand."

"But I didn't," Gulcher Gleeson said.

Little Gulcher looked at his hand then, and saw that it was all right. He started moving his fingers. There was a tingling hurt to them now, but he was glad they were there to hurt.

"How old are you, son?" the Gulcher jabbed.

"Fifteen—comin' sixteen."

The Gulcher nodded. "You're ready. You can take the trail with us tonight."

A fierce light leaped to the boy's

blue eyes. "You mean you ain't mad at me fer—fer lettin' you shoot the gun outa my hand?"

Dog-town Arata showed fangs of yellowed teeth in a grin. "It ees not that you are slow, Leetle Gulcher. But your old man, he ees fas'!"

"You ride the owl-hoot tonight, kid," the Gulcher promised.

The boy's eyes burned an even fiercer blue. "And I won't have to hold no horses?"

"No leather in your fist tonight—gun steel."

LITTLE GULCHER who had cut his teeth on a six-gun, and who had been brought up on the owl-hoot and taught to hate the law with a burning hatred, crouched in the darkness and waited. He kept shifting his six-gun to his left hand and swiping his sweaty palm against his overalls leg.

Louder and louder through the night, significant sounds beat upon his ears, a clopping of horses' hoofs, a grinding of iron-shod wheels on granite as the Silverton stage wheeled along the Three Smoke Trail. Directly across from Little Gulcher, a bulking shadow among the rocks lining the trail, big Gulcher also crouched and waited.

Little Gulcher was thinking exultantly that tonight he would do a man's work. Just he and the Old Man together. A lifetime of beatings and cursings from Gulcher Gleeson dimmed into nothingness in Little Gulcher's mind as he speculated feverishly upon the new set-up between himself and his Old Man.

The Old Man was training him. At the risk of his own life, the Old Man was letting the son back the play. It was Dog-town Arata who held the horses tonight; Little Gulcher whose fists was six-gun weighted. The Old Man trusted him. It was a grand, exciting thing to be trusted.

Little Gulcher, in fact, was drunk with his responsibility. He became aware all at once he was holding his breath. He gulped air. It was good air. Everything was good. He felt a oneness with everything—the balsam-tanged air wafting down from the high range, the moon-glimmer on the granite trail, the stage sounds, coming closer and closer. Everything was good but the law. That, he hated, as Gulcher Gleeson, through the formative years, had dinned it into him to hate.

With gasping suddenness, it seemed, the split-second for which he waited was upon him. The tenseness, the half-fright, left him with a swoop. His sweaty hands went dry. Air breathed naturally into his lungs. And he was standing at the side of the trail in a crouch.

The four-horse team was rearing back as the driver hauled in on the lines. The coach was rocking on its leather thorough-braces. The Old Man was holding down the other side of the trail. His voice was chopping.

"Throw up your hands!"

The driver got the horses quieted and lifted his arms.

"Reach down in the bucket and heave out the Chloride Mine's gold," the Old Man ordered.

"Ain't ridin' no gold tonight," the tight-lipped driver said.

"The hell you ain't! Get it!"

"I told you—"

A blasting roar cut short his words as the Gulcher's gun slashed fire through the night. The driver clawed at his lead-drilled chest with a spasmodic motion, slid sidewise, and pitched from the high box, his limp body scraping the wheel and almost toppling on Little Gulcher.

He was dead before he struck ground, and something seemed to die in Little Gulcher, too. He stood transfixed, like one of the ghostly rocks bordering the road.

Another six-gun blast mingled its echoes with the first. Little Gulcher shook himself and came alive. The saffron flare which marked that sec-

ond shot came from a window of the stagecoach. Dimly Little Gulcher could make out the form of a line passenger, leveling down to shoot again at the Old Man.

And the Old Man was helpless—stumbling, falling down, and the passenger's gun poking for the heart.

Gunfire shattered the air again. But it wasn't the passenger's gun. It was Little Gulcher's. And Little Gulcher was screaming, and he wasn't aware of it. His bandanna had slipped down from above his nose and hung loosely around his neck, and he wasn't aware of that, either.

But the next second, he was conscious of the Old Man's voice.

"Git, you damn little fool, you! Git!"

LITTLE GULCHER was running then. It didn't seem to be consciously directed effort. It seemed like he had always been running. And pretty soon he was riding, he and the Old Man and Dog-town Arata. The hoof thunder pounded in his ears. And it seemed like he had always been riding.

But after a while they pulled the blowing horses down to an easy lope.

The Old Man didn't say anything. He just looked at Little Gulcher balefully every once in a while. The boy knew that he was holding himself in. As soon as they were clear of the law, the Old Man would burst wide open and spill his anger all over the mountainside.

It happened in little more than an eye flash as soon as they rode in to the Hawk's Roost. Gulcher Gleeson swung off his horse, pulled the boy off with one yank of his grizzly paw, and with the other, fisted a hard-knuckled blow to the side of the head which knocked Little Gulcher off his feet.

The boy was game. He got up and came at the Old Man. He might as well have butted himself against a cliff. The Old Man hung one on him that crumpled him back, skittering on his shoulders a dozen feet away. He went out cold with that one.

Blinking painfully back to consciousness, he heard Gulcher Gleeson roaring:

"A hell of a stick-up man you turned out to be! From here on out till you're twenty-one, you stay home and do the dirty work. You ain't even fitten to hold horses. You're jus' a yellow, squallin' coyote whelp!"

Resentment boiled to the surface in Little Gulcher. "I saved your life, didn't I?" he muttered. "That hombre was bearin' down on you when you was stumblin' there, an' my bullet kicked the gun outa his hand."

"That's what's got me sore, whelp! Why didn't you put that bullet *through him?*"

"He was kind of backways to me—"

"The back's the place fer bullets! You'll never be no good till you kill, and this gent was a good one to start on. You know who he was?"

Splintering pain was shrieking in Little Gulcher's head. "No, I don't know," he jerked.

"That there was old Clem Halloc, sheriff of Rimrock County. He was ridin' the stage, protectin' the gold shipment. Musta got wind of our intentions. Me and that old tarantula's had a feud on fer twenty years. I hate his gizzard. You're my son. You got my wolf blood in you. You got to hate Halloc's gizzard, too."

"Sure," Little Gulcher said sullenly. "Anybody wearin' a law badge, I hate 'em. But what'd you have to kill that stage driver for? He wasn't gunnin' you."

Gulcher Gleeson cursed. "You tellin' me how to run my business? He lied to me, so I killed him."

"Maybe he didn't lie. Maybe there wasn't any gold."

"What of it? A fellow's got to kill once in a while to keep tough. Keep thinkin' about that the next four years when you're sandin' down the pots and pans, and curryin' hosses."

Little Gulcher did think of it. In the days that followed, doing the dirty work around camp, taking the Old Man's cursings and fistings, he thought a lot about killing.

The Old Man often told him: "Any time you want to prove you're a wolf and not a yellow coyote, you can go down to town and lead some buttonholes in Clem Halloc's back. Make your kill and you can run with the pack. If you don't do that, you got to wait till you're twenty-one."

Little Gulcher waited till he was twenty-one.

CHAPTER II

Wolf Brand

ON THAT fateful day he told the Old Man, calmly enough, he guessed he'd go down into Silverton and celebrate. Gulcher Gleeson looked at him with a peculiar gleam in his beady eyes, shrugged his ponderous shoulders, and asked:

"Why not?"

As the months of Little Gulcher's probation period had rolled into years, the Old Man had treated him with increasing respect. Little Gulcher's calloused trigger finger was responsible. He had quickened his draw until some of the men were betting he was faster than the Gulcher himself.

Oddly, he didn't look much older than on that day four years back, when he had ridden with the pack. Taller now, the blue eyes narrowed down a little, and with a leanness that spoke of cat-quick actions, he didn't look much like the Old Man. But that he was the true son of the wolf, those who had been privileged to watch him at his daily gun practice would have bet solid money.

He could have ridden with the pack long before this. But the keen edge of desire had strangely vanished. There had been times when he had absented himself for months far inside the ranges. Coursing the dim trails, existing on the country as completely as any savage animal, he had come to live more and more inside of himself. He saw few men other than the Gulcher's owl-hooters, and an occasional outlander—a trapper, miner, or herder.

Sometimes his loneliness weighed upon him bleakly. He craved the association of men. And women. Particularly women. It was as gnawingly real as any food hunger. On the day he was twenty-one, he told the Old Man he was riding down to Silverton to celebrate.

The Gulcher couldn't go with him. There wasn't a town in four states cool enough to hold him. It was a little different with Dog-town Arata. He hadn't shown himself in the towns away from the border enough times to build a wide reputation. He could take a chance once in a while and slip down.

What he went for this time was to scout the Chloride Mine, find out when they were scheduled to make a gold shipment. But Little Gulcher thought Dog-town was being sent along as a sort of special bodyguard.

He swaggered a little as he entered the Gold Bar Saloon and ordered whiskey. The bartender and a few hangers-on blinked. Little Gulcher looked easily three years younger than he was, and with his hair shagged down over his neck, he looked like he might have crawled out of some bear den. Dog-town had gone about his personal business. Little Gulcher was thoroughly enjoying the novelty of kicking up his heels in town alone.

"He's a heller outa the hills, ain't he?" some one said, watching him smooth down his third whiskey.

"I bet he couldn't shoot a bird if'n it sot on the end of his gun," another taunted.

Little Gulcher showed them. He picked up a beer mug, strode to the open door with the holstered hogleg banging his thigh, tossed the mug far over the street, drew his gun and

shattered the mug with the first bullet, while it was high in the air.

Just to prove it wasn't luck, he walked solemnly back to the bar, scooped up a couple of small whiskey glasses, tossed them out the door together, and broke them both, using two separate draws.

The exhibition left men staring. The bartender even forgot to get tough about his broken glassware.

Questions poured upon Little Gulcher then.

"Where'd you learn to do that kind of shootin', kid?"

"Where you from?"

"Who'n tarnation are ye?"

Little Gulcher grinned. "I was borned suckin' my milk through a six-gun muzzle," he told them. "I'm jus' a bronc snapper hazin' through."

A man with mean, glinting eyes and pockmarked face came up from the back of the room then and spoiled his fun.

"Hell," the man said, "I know him. Seen him with his old man down in Sonora once. He's Gulcher Gleeson's brat."

LITTLE GULCHER vaguely remembered the man as one of the shadowy legion who had ridden with his father. This man's leering pockmarked face crowded in from the past, but only for an instant. Little Gulcher quickly forgot it in the blighting whirl of another revelation. They were staring at him, every man in the house, with strange looks in their eyes. Hostile looks. Some of them angry. Some of them shrinking. It was as though a sidewinder had crawled across the threshold.

That was it. They were looking at him as though he were a snake. What the hell was coming off here?

"Get outa here, kid! Chase yourself. Don't come back."

It was the bartender talking. When Little Gulcher blinked in baffled disbelief, a cowboy said:

"You heard him, kid. Get out! We don't want none of Gulcher Gleeson here."

Before that battery of hostile glares, Little Gulcher stumbled out the door. He tried other places. But word of his identity got around. From saloon to saloon, from livery barn, stage office, blacksmith shop he trod, until his spirit was broken and he would have cried if he hadn't kept telling himself he was Gulcher Gleeson's son, and no son of the Gulcher's cried.

Their words beat upon him like blows.

"Get out! . . . You ain't wanted. . . . Get out 'fore we ride you out —on a rail . . . You'd make a nice noose job, kid."

Frightened and bewildered for all the scornful front he maintained, he pushed his bronc up the sun-drenched slope away from town, wounded by their words. All he had asked for was their friendship. He was a human being wanting to associate with other human beings. And they had treated him like a snake.

The Old Man was right then in teaching him to hate.

"Men are wolves and they'll tear into you," the Gulcher had said, " 'less you tear into them first."

Now he understood the mockery that had gleamed in the Old Man's eyes. The Old Man had known what would happen to his son down here in Silverton. He felt closer to the Old Man than he had for years.

"All right, the hell with them all!" Little Gulcher gritted.

He pulled up suddenly, staring. The trail was cutting through a wet canyon. Water gurgled and aspen leaves made soft patter in the breeze. Slab-sided boulders, huge as a cabin, were strewn about. One of the boulders hugged the turn of the trail so close he could have reached out and touched it.

The boulder wasn't all he could have touched. The girl. He could have touched her, too! The pretty girl with eyes as dark as a canyon

pool, and hair like a shimmer of night touching her shoulders. She was sitting on the boulder, her slim brown legs dangling. And she was watching him intently.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothin'."

She knew that he lied. He knew that she knew it, but oddly he felt no embarrassment before her. He was wondering, breathlessly, if his father meant him to hate girls as well as men. Particularly girls like this one, with dark hair and eyes, who sat on rocks. She wasn't nearly as tall as he. But in another way she was as big as the world. This tight feeling inside him, flaming, when he looked at her. She was bigger than the world. She was everything in it and out of it. It didn't matter a whang what his father might say about girls.

Little Gulcher didn't know it, but he had fallen in love.

"My name's Gleeson," he told her, and waited to see if a kind of shrinking scorn would show in her eyes.

It didn't, and he was so glad, he felt that something inside him would break.

"Mine's Ruth Halloc," she said.

THE name meant nothing to him at the moment. He was too full of her. It was a thrilling, lifting fullness. And now, with her eyes softly, intently on him, he did begin to feel an awkwardness.

"Tell me," she asked, "what *was* the matter?"

The awkwardness became an overwhelming force. He felt as though his muscles were going to burst through his jacket.

"I want to be friends to people," he blurted. "I want folks to like me."

Embarrassment built up, demanding outlet in action.

"Look!" he said.

His arm drawing the gun was like a flashing bird's wing. In the canyon the shots crashed flatly, picking off three pine cones from a tree up-slope. They were small cones and the tree was not close.

She looked at him with shining eyes. "I think that's wonderful!" she said.

"I'm a pretty good shot," he admitted. He could feel his pulse beating strongly. His face was hot. He was happier than he had ever been in his life.

"I don't see how dad could do any better," she told him, "and he's as good as they come."

"My Old Man's good, too. He taught me. What's your Old Man do?"

"Why, don't you know? He's the sheriff."

Little Gulcher's mouth sagged open. Ruth Halloc, she'd said her name was. Sure. Old Clem Halloc's daughter! What would she say if she knew the man she was talking to had shot a gun out of her father's hand?

A movement in the near creek willows caught his attention.

"What's that?" he snapped.

"Must be dad, I reckon, comin' to see what the shootin's about."

Little Gulcher looked wildly around. "Is your father here? Who's he huntin'?"

She looked at him curiously. "Why, he's not hunting anybody. He's been fishin' down the creek a ways."

"Fishin'!" It struck him as utterly incredible. A lawman wasn't some one who fished. He was some one you killed to keep him from killing you.

"Of course, fishing," Ruth answered. "What's funny about that? Sheriffs like to fish the same as anybody else."

"Yeah, yeah. I reckon— Well, I'll be goin'."

He heeled the bronc, but he didn't go far. A few steps only. That was because Sheriff Clem Halloc shouldering a fishing pole, butted out of the willows onto the trail directly in front of him.

Clem Halloc was a little old man

with stoop shoulders and wrinkled, saddle-leather skin. A gray little man. He looked mild as milk. Unless you noticed his eyes. They were the same fathomless blue as Little Gulcher's eyes. Steady. An eternal youthfulness there.

He was one of the famous old frontier sheriffs, Clem Halloc. He and a handful like him had exercised almost absolute power for close onto a half century over a raw, unruly land twice the size of the gentled country beyond the Mississippi. He was ruled by an indomitable purpose. He loved the West. He believed in it. He had devoted his life to delivering it from lawless white men, as those earlier frontier scouts had wrested it from red men.

Clem Halloc represented law and order.

"Goin' somewheres, younker?" he asked mildly.

LITTLE GULCHER'S thoughts blazed. This man his father had insisted should be killed on sight. But you couldn't kill a mild little man who had blue eyes that twinkled and who carried a fishing pole over his shoulder. Little Gulcher had an uneasy feeling that the sheriff wouldn't be easy killing, anyway. Lots of men must have tried it down through the outlaw years.

While he was thinking what he could do, he heard Ruth's husky, sweet voice saying:

"This is Mr. Gleeson, dad. He can shoot better'n anyone I ever knew except you."

"Kinda young for a gun notcher, ain't he?" the sheriff said.

"You got me wrong," Little Gulcher muttered. "I ain't no glory gunner. An' I ain't so young as maybe I look."

The sheriff did something then which might have meant anything, depending on how one looked at it. He scratched at his ribs with one flinty forefinger. The finger was on his right hand, and only a few inches below that hand a sullenly gleaming gun butt stuck out from holster.

The fishing pole remained unwavering on his left shoulder. His eyes were unwavering, too—those blue eyes becoming a little flinty now—as they probed Little Gulcher's face.

The sheriff said: "That there red bandanna hangin' loose around your neck, you ever wear it up over your face? Good protection agin' mosquitos, if they was any mosquitos."

In that instant Little Gulcher knew that the sheriff was looking back four years. The bandanna that had slipped unmasking his face on the night of the stage stick-up, felt now strangely like a noose around his neck, choking him.

Little Gulcher fidgeted, and scratched vigorously at his own ribs—just a few inches above his holstered six-shooter.

With his next words the sheriff came out more in the open. "So Gulcher Gleeson," he cracked, "sends his son into Silverton to scout the Chloride Mine gold shipments! Nice goin'. Who would figger Little Gulcher for a spy?"

Little Gulcher could see that the time for talking was past. With a leaning movement, his body coordinated with his striking arm in a blur of motion that rasped six-gun from leather in the blink of an eye.

He didn't shoot that gun. The reason was that the sheriff had anticipated the draw. With his gun half-leveled, Little Gulcher, to his stunning dismay, found himself looking down the black barrel of a gun holding on him as steadily as the sheriff's bleak blue eyes.

Half-braced for the tearing thud of lead, Little Gulcher experienced another surprise.

"I throw little fishes back into the water," *the sheriff said, gently, "to* live and grow big—and maybe bite on my hook again." He stepped aside. His voice grew harsh. "Get on up the

trail! And don't ever come back!"

Little Gulcher lit out. With the sheriff's gun lined on him, what else could he do?

CHAPTER III

Heritage of Hate

RACING along, with only his bitter thoughts for company, Little Gulcher felt hatred for the law as he had never experienced it before. His father had taught him to hate. But it had been an impersonal thing. Now he had something he could get his teeth into.

The sheriff, like all those others in Silverton, had refused to treat him as a human being. Worse than that, the sheriff had humiliated him before the girl, had barred him from the only thing in the world he had ever found to love.

He hated the sheriff—almost enough to kill!

But oddly, mingled with the hatred, was a half-admitted yearning. He would have liked to call the sheriff friend. The sheriff was a *man*. He could do everything the Gulcher could do, and he didn't roar around about it. He was gentle. If he had a son, that son would be treated good, not beaten around as though he were a mean dog.

The sheriff had turned him loose, too, when he could just as well have arrested him and thrown him in jail.

That last thought clicked something in Little Gulcher's mind that made him pull down to a walk in a hoof-skidding instant.

Why had the sheriff turned him loose? It wasn't because of any love for him. No. There must be a reason behind it. And here was the reason—the sheriff wanted to set some one on his trail. The sheriff was counting on Little Gulcher to reveal the Hawk's Roost hideout of Big Gulcher.

Smart hombre, the sheriff. Like hell! He'd see how smart he was.

Little Gulcher began veering away from the trail which led to Hawk's Roost. He was careful to leave tracks which could be followed. Over the gravel hills of Rimrock Basin, he rode along and into a canyon, heavy-grown with thorny mesquite and catclaw.

Here he back-tracked a short distance and holed in alongside his own trail. He waited, quiet as a stalking cougar, for perhaps a half hour. Then, distantly, he heard approaching hoofbeats.

Gun butt shoved hard against the heel of his hand as he filled and waited. Blood pounded his ears, and the hoofbeats came closer and closer. Some one riding at breakneck speed. Some one who didn't think it necessary to guard against an ambush. Well, they'd find the son was as tough a chunk of whang leather as the father.

And the Old Man claimed he wouldn't be any good till he made his kill. Well, maybe now was the time.

The hoofbeats sounded in welling thunder. And then the horse and rider were veering around a shoulder of granite into close view, riding straight into Little Gulcher's gun.

Finger tensed on trigger. Then suddenly all the life went out of Little Gulcher. The steely glint went out of his eyes, his tightened lips grew slack, his limp wrist allowed the heavy gun to sag.

The horse and rider swept past in a hoof-pounding roar, and Little Gulcher lurched out into their dust and yelled: "Hey!"

The startled rider looked behind, pulled the horse to a haunching stop.

The rider was a girl—Ruth Halloc, the daughter of the Rimrock sheriff.

HER words came in a tremulous rush: "I've been following your trail. I came to warn you. Dad has the—the most outlandish ideas about you. He thinks you're an outlaw—one of the Gulcher gang. That's why

he let you go, so he could trail you to the Gulcher's hideout. He went back to town to scare up a posse. And I came on to warn you."

She was leaning far out of saddle. Her face was very close to Little Gulcher's.

"What—what made you come to warn me?" he stammered.

"I didn't want you to get into any trouble."

"Why—why didn't you?"

"Because I could tell you weren't really an outlaw."

"You could, huh? Well, what if I was to tell you—"

He didn't tell her. Not then. There was a good reason. She leaned a little farther out of saddle and kissed him suddenly.

Squarely on his mouth her lips pressed hard, and then she was rearing her horse and dashing away, madly, in the direction she had come from. She didn't look back, and Little Gulcher was left standing there with the sharp, sweet taste of her kiss on his mouth.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said.

Then he holstered his gun, filled saddle, and rode swiftly away. He rode to cover his trail this time. Overhead, the sun slid down the hill of the sky and dropped behind the towering rimrock in a blaze of evening color—unbelievable reds, yellows, oranges. Purple shadows fingered down from distant peaks, swallowing the valley, blotting out everything.

It was late night when Little Gulcher reined in at the Hawk's Roost hideout.

"Where's Dog-town?" the Old Man wanted to know, and when he heard how it was, he raved. He laid down the law to Little Gulcher in old time manner.

"You're the son of a wolf!" the Old Man said, with his thin lips drawn back from his teeth so that he looked, in all reality, more animal than human.

"Wolves don't hobnob with town folks. Especially not with sheriff's daughters! I ever hear of you havin' the leetlest more thing to do with her, an' I'll kill you myself, by hell! So they run you out of town on account you're Gulcher Gleeson's son? What of it? They've got the towns, but we've got the rest of the country. The hell with 'em! Trouble with you is you don't hate enough. You haven't made your first kill. After that you'll feel different. You'll hate, all right. You'll have to, to live."

A little later Dog-town Arata slunk in, and he and the Gulcher and Hack Blont talked until morning.

The next day at dusk all four of them were headed down the mountain. They didn't tell Little Gulcher where they were going, but when they eased their broncs in among the grotesque rocks alongside the Three Smoke trail, he protested:

"Here's where we stuck up the Silverton stage. You wouldn't go to strike twict from the same place, would you?"

"That's jus' what we would do," the Gulcher growled. "'Cause why? 'Cause all them town dummies'll be figurin' jus' like you. Lightnin' don't never strike twict in the same place, they'll say. An' they won't on no account be lookin' fer it here. But here's where she'll strike."

Dog-town and Hack holed in on one side of the trail. The Gulcher and Little Gulcher crouched among the ghostly boulders on the other.

Little Gulcher unaccountably shivered a little. "They ain't no stage due this time of night, is there?" he asked?"

"We ain't cleanin' no stage tonight," the Gulcher whispered harshly. "Dog-town's found out about 'em saddle-packin' some gold down tonight—under armed escort. We ain't *shootin' guns out of hand* tonight, whelp. If we shoot, we kill. Savvy that?"

"Yeah, I get it."

FROM somewhere back in the mesquite sounded the drowsy flutter of bird wings. It wasn't long before, wafted on the balsam-tanged air, the sound of easy-loping horses came down.

Little Gulcher felt a tremor shoot through him. His hand gripped hard on gun butt. The familiar pressure relaxed him somewhat. The gun had a nice solid feel to it.

"You take your cues from me," the Gulcher rasped a final warning. "Back whatever plays I make."

"Yeah—sure."

Little Gulcher couldn't help being impressed. He'd had a lifetime of phantom drawing and pine-cone shooting. For what? For this very minute coming up. So he could back the Old Man's play.

The *clop-clop* of shod hoofs on granite sounded louder. Little Gulcher picked nervously at the bandanna swathing his face. His breath, against the cloth, felt hot, sticky.

The moon glimmer picked out the first of the gold riders as he loped around the turn, and Little Gulcher started, because the rider was Sheriff Clem Halloc.

"Well, what the hell?" he told himself.

Following the sheriff, rode a man with saddlebags on his horse. That's where the gold would be. A third man rode a little way behind, guarding the shipment from the rear.

It was all like Dog-town Arata had said it would be. Dog-town and Hack holed in closer to the turn, would cover the saddlebag man and the rear guard. That would leave the sheriff for the Gulchers!

Little Gulcher felt his arm gripped fiercely. It was a sign. He leaped to his feet in unison with big Gulcher as the sheriff's horse came opposite.

"Claw air, Halloc!" Gulcher Gleeson roared.

"Claw air!" Little Gulcher shouted backing the play.

On down the line, Dog-town and Hack were out in the road, each covering a man, and roaring similar orders. Everything had been spaced and timed just right. The Old Man was sure slick.

The saddlebag man and the rear guard were reaching for a piece of sky. The sheriff was hunched forward in saddle, hands low on the reins. He seemed to be having some trouble quieting his horse.

"Get 'em up!" the Gulcher rapped savagely.

Sheriff Halloc half-raised his arms.

"Get them bends all the way out of the elbows," the Gulcher ordered, "or we gun you down!"

The sheriff sighed deeply. The night was so still, it was easy to hear. It seemed to be a resigned sigh. He settled back in saddle and started reaching his hands slowly upward.

The movement was so natural that both the Gulchers, big and little, couldn't help relaxing a little bit, too.

It was what the wily sheriff had planned. The old frontier gun master hadn't made his reputation by lying down to other men's guns. He'd made it by bucking odds so heavy that he seemed to have no chance.

He couldn't keep it up all his life, people said. But they had been saying it all his life. And here he was now, trying it again. It was a fearful risk he took. Even though he had the advantage of surprise on his side, when all was said and done, there were two guns poking for his heart.

CHAPTER IV

Gunhawk's Gold

WHAT the sheriff did was to hold on to the reins with his off hand. At the instant when he appeared most relaxed he tugged fiercely. The horse reared, pawing air with its forelegs; and at the same wink, the sheriff was unseating himself, hurling his body downward on the off-side.

Twin guns roared as the Gulchers,

big and little, poured lead in orange blasts at the sheriff.

Those bullets reached all around him combing his clothes, slashing saddle leather and horsehide. But so unexpected was his maneuver that none of the slugs drilled him dead center and only one bit any blood at all.

The snorting horse cleared in a pounding of hoofs. The sheriff's own gun was flaming, slamming back bullet for bullet. Jerking, zigzagging, the sheriff found partial cover behind one of the ghostly rocks.

At what instant the others entered the fight, Little Gulcher was not sure. He knew only that everybody was fighting, that bullets were sucking past with hornet whines and flattening out against the spooky rocks.

He saw the saddlebag man go down under the Gulcher's blaring gun, and he saw Hack Blont stiffen clear to his toes as he stopped a bad one. The gun fell out of Hack's hands and he clawed at his breast where the bullet was, and twisted halfway around in a way Little Gulcher had never seen a man's body twist.

And then Hack was on the ground. He was dead, Little Gulcher guessed, because he just lay there, his two hands clutched full of gravel, and his face under the moonlight as ghostly pale as one of the rocks. There was something black on the ground under his chin. The black seemed to be spreading.

Little Gulcher saw all this in one gun-blazing second. Anguish cut through him, an unfamiliar grief which took the starch out of his gun wrist for a moment. Of all the gunnies who had trailed with his father, he had liked Hack Blont best. Hack was a little kinder. He laughed more often. And it wasn't a mean laugh.

And now Hack was dead.

The saddlebag man was dead, too. He might have been as good a fellow as Hack!

A hoarse-mouthed bellow sounded above the gun thunder. It was Gulcher Gleeson. "Come alive, whelp! Throw your lead! Kill! Kill!"

Little Gulcher started blazing then, backing his Old Man's play. He dashed in and out among the peaked rocks, shooting, loading, screaming, shooting. An answering bullet creased a fine red furrow through the flesh of his leg and he didn't know it until afterwards.

He saw another man go down. It was the sheriff's deputy. The man wasn't killed. At least, he crawled away. Little Gulcher remembered his Old Man's urging: "Kill! Kill!"

Little Gulcher drew his gun. But he lowered it again without shooting.

In the fever of the fight, with bullets blasting, it was easy to throw down on the gun flashes. It was a different matter, he found, to shoot a wounded man, crawling. But his father could do it! That's why folks called him the Gulcher. The Old Man was fiercely proud of that name. Or pretended to be. Little Gulcher had been proud of his own name. But now doubts assailed him.

The Old Man's voice reached him again. "Slam out, whelp!" the Gulcher bellowed.

THE Old Man was forking the horse that carried the saddlebags. Dog-town Arata was making a beeline into the mesquite where their own horses were ground hitched.

Little Gulcher skinned out, too. He didn't see the sheriff anywhere. But there wasn't any lead in the air. The sheriff must be dead.

Rounding one of the starkly rearing rocks, he changed his mind about this last. He almost bumped headlong into the sheriff. The gray little man was bending over, pounding his gun on a rock. A slapping bullet had jammed the cylinder with lead.

Little Gulcher threw down with his own gun. Here was his chance. He was close enough to blow the sheriff's head off.

Little Gulcher remembered his Old Man's words: "I hate Clem Halloc's gizzard! You got to hate it, too. You're my son; you got my wolf blood in you. You got to kill, before he kills you!"

The sheriff expected to be killed. Pale in the moonlight, Little Gulcher caught the look of grim expectancy that swept the old frontiersman's face as he braced for the bullet shock.

An odd thing happened then. In that flashing instant when Little Gulcher's finger was flattening against the trigger, and life faded away and death slammed close, the sheriff was no longer an enemy, a lawman. He was simply a man, a gray little person with blue twinkling eyes, and a fishing pole over his shoulder.

Little Gulcher stayed his finger, and thereby lost his chance to kill.

The sheriff's gun, like a rattler striking, slashed up, struck with a harsh metallic clang against Little Gulcher's leveled six-gun.

The gun went off in a blaze of saffron flame. But it was only a reflex shot. The bullet coursed off toward the moon, and so did Little Gulcher's gun as it was knocked out of his hand by the sheriff's rattler-quick action.

The sheriff struck once more, with the long gun barrel against Little Gulcher's head.

A faint crackle of underbrush sounded back as Gulcher Gleeson and Dog-town Arata spurred away through the brooding night with the saddlebag gold.

Little Gulcher didn't hear. He was slumping into an inert heap at the sheriff's feet.

WHEN he regained consciousness a few minutes later he raised groggily on one elbow. The moon still shone. The rocks stood about in stiff solemnity, like tombstones. Four men were grouped near. Three of them lay prone in stiff, unnatural positions. The fourth crouched on lean haunches.

The man who crouched was Sheriff Clem Halloc. His eyes glowed like coals. The law badge on his opened vast glinted softly. His ready six-gun glinted, too.

The gun moved slightly, indicating the three still figures.

"Two of them's my men; one of them's yours," he said grimly. "You're luckier'n them—maybe."

Little Gulcher felt a cold sickness in the pit of his stomach.

"Dead?"

"Dead."

"Why?" Little Gulcher muttered vaguely.

"On account of another man's gold," the sheriff clipped. "And on account of your father's greed."

"The Old Man wanted *me* to kill," Little Gulcher mumbled.

"You had me hung on the end of your gun. Why didn't you?"

"I dunno. Why didn't *you* kill me when I was lyin' here,"

"I ain't a wolf," the sheriff said.

"Reckon I ain't either—but the Old Man says I got wolf blood in me."

"Mebbe you have and mebbe you haven't. From what I see of you, son, you haven't. Once before you could of killed me, and didn't."

Little Gulcher shook his head to clear it of pain-racking fog. "You called me, son. I wisht I had been your son, instead of Gulcher Gleeson's kid."

"Mebbe I wish so, too," the sheriff said gently: "I had a boy once. Would be about your age." Almost imperceptibly the sheriff shook his own grizzled head as though to clear it of torturing memories.

Little Gulcher wondered why the sheriff looked so sad in that moment. He didn't wonder long.

"Spread yourself," the sheriff said gruffly. "I got to be takin' you in."

Little Gulcher stood up. "Where to? Jail?"

"Jail!"

"I don't care!" Little Gulcher said defiantly. "The Old Man wouldn't

have much use for me if I went back without killin' you. He'd want to kill *me*, I reckon."

The sheriff was rubbing at his jaw. "Tell you what, son. I'm goin' to lay a bet on you. I'm bettin' there's more human blood in you than wolf blood."

His voice grew grim for a moment. "I'm the only livin' witness for the law of what's happened tonight. I could leave you go free if I wanted. But I don't think that's best for you. I'm goin' to send you to prison to pay your debt to society."

"I might's well be there as any place," Little Gulcher said bleakly. "I ain't welcomed in the towns where law folks lives."

"You *will* be welcomed—if you take your medicine without whinin', and go straight afterwards."

"Ain't I plumb apt to come out more of a wolf'n when I went in?"

"I'm bettin' you ain't, on account I'm jus' about all the law they is in Rimrock County, an' I'm seein' to it you get a short sentence. Jus' long enough to strain the wolf out of your blood, son, and give the human blood a chance."

"Whatever you say, sheriff," Little Gulcher muttered.

CHAPTER V

Jail Break

IT goes without saying that a man in jail is a miserable creature. The meager cell walls enclose a maximum of bitterness, hatred, malignance, despair.

But to Little Gulcher, held in the Silverton jail awaiting trial, life flowed on like a breathless and beautiful dream. His jail days were happy days, bright with hope and charitable thoughts for all.

Sheriff Halloc was partly responsible. The sheriff talked to him in a way no man ever had. Not about killing. About saving. About taking a wild, raw land and making it safe for men to live in, and work and play and love. Little Gulcher developed an almost worshipful admiration for the sheriff.

That wasn't half what he developed for the sheriff's daughter. Ruth came every day and sat in the jail corridor outside the iron grating, and helped him learn things out of books.

He had protested at first. "The Old Man says a gunny on the owl-hoot's got no need for book learnin'."

"But you're not trailing with a wild bunch any more," Ruth had reminded. "You're going to—to prison for just a little while. You're going to keep on studying there and when you come out, dad's going to have a job waiting for you. And I—"

"You'll be waitin' for me?" he questioned fiercely.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes!"

His face was sober. He looked older, somehow. He said:

"I want to kiss you, Ruth!"

Red flushed her face, crept down the soft curve of her throat, disappeared under the starched edge of her summer gingham. But she moved close to the bars.

His hands reached through and pulled her closer. They kissed. The bars were a searing pain against his face, he pressed so hard. They could have been knife blades and still he would have felt only her lips.

"I love you!" he said huskily.

Her face, too, was marked with white where the bars had pressed.

"I love you, too!" she breathed.

The path ahead for Little Gulcher, on and on through the years, seemed smooth and untroubled. In reality, though, the smooth days for him were less in number than the fingers of his hands.

Already in his thoughts there was a certain unreality about the old life. The Old Man seemed distant, like something bad in a dream. But there was nothing distant about Gulcher Gleeson's thoughts when he speculated about Little Gulcher.

At the Hawk's Roost hideout the

Gulcher was facing ten new men whom the saddlebag gold had bought —ill-assorted hombres as to size and garb, but hard-lipped all, with a restless, furtive glint to their eyes. They wore their guns tied low, with cutaway holsters.

"It'll be tonight," the Gulcher was telling them. "We won't wait for the Chloride Mine to ship no more gold. This won't be no trail stick-up. We'll outguess 'em again, strike at the source this time, raid their strongroom at Silverton. At the same time we'll turn the kid outa jail."

"What's the percentage riskin' our necks fer the kid?" someone wanted to know.

The lean and wolfish *mestizo,* Dog-town Arata, answered: "On account because thees Leetle Gulcher, he can shoot off the spots from a pair of dice. One good hombre he weel become when he has made his keel."

"That's it," the Gulcher said. "Don't think you're doin' me no personal favor by blazin' a run-out for my brat. I ain't sentimental about him. He could rot the rest of his life behind walls, only I hate to see all that good gun talent goin' to waste."

"The way I get it, he's blood-shy," a gunhawk from Amarillo muttered.

"He'll be all right after he's made his kill. He'll make it. I figure to frame him to a spot where he'll have to eat lead or shoot."

AT two-fifteen in the dark of the moon, guns blazed in the streets of Silverton. Saffron jets lit the blackness, men's voices hooted, and over all the six-gun thunder crashed in a devil's drumbeat.

Disturbed chitter sparrows, nesting behind the false fronts of the main street buildings, uttered their protest. Here and there in a mining camp shack a baby cried. Some women, hearing the man-made thunder, tunneled deeper under bed quilts and lay trembling. But most of them, sturdy frontier folk, leaped from the covers and thrust guns in the hands of their men.

Little Gulcher, locked in the jail cell, knew what it was all about. He could hear his Old Man's bellowing voice. And while men fought at the storeroom for possession of the Chloride gold, Little Gulcher heard a more immediate sound, the voice of Dog-town Arata hissing through the window bars.

Little Gulcher crept close to the window.

"Ah, you are there—*bueno!*" Dog-town rasped.

Rope was fed through in doubled strands and around the bars. Rowels bit deep in horse flesh. Two bronco snorted, haunched in and pulled. Wood screamed and splintered as the frame into which the iron bars were set, pulled loose, and with it half the side wall of the Silverton jail.

Little Gulcher was appalled. He didn't want to be released from jail. This was the nearest thing to a home he had ever known. He didn't go out, now that he had the chance. So Dog-town and two others thrust in.

"You skulk in corners!" Dog-town rasped. *"Por qué?* It ees not some cowardly vigilante lynchers, no! It ees the Gulcher who liberates."

Hands clawed roughly at Little Gulcher, hustled him outside. A gun and cartridge belt were thrust into his hands. The touch of gun steel was like a door closing off from him all the good things—love, friends, a chance to live in peaceful understanding and security among his fellow men. Release from jail meant banishment to the outland trails for as long as he should live. It meant a life of furtiveness and hate.

He might have turned the gun on Dog-town Arata and the other hellions. Then and there he might have fought for his chance to go to prison. But he didn't. He fought for his life, instead.

From close by, between blackly looming buildings, six-gun lead

blazed in a half-dozen blasting roars. Bullets rasped close, plugging into the jailhouse walls. One of the jail-delivering gunmen screamed in quick agony as a slug with his number on it cut him down.

"Kill the lawmen!" Dog-town Arata roared.

His finger clamped on trigger. His gun talked. The other outlaws were pushing lead also. So was Little Gulcher.

What else could he do? In that pitiless second, it was fight or be killed. Little Gulcher fought.

Shoulder to shoulder with the Hawk's Roost gunmen, he crouched and slammed back bullet for bullet. He was with them when they made their charge for the horses, ducking, twisting, shooting. So close into the guns they charged that he was recognized.

"The Little Gulcher!" the cry went up. "Get the Little Gulcher."

They did get another of Little Gulcher's new gun pards. But Little Gulcher and Dog-town Arata forked broncs under a blaze of lead and high-tailed it away. They couldn't break through the lawmen's guns to join the Gulcher's murderous mob at the Chloride Mine's strong-room. They had to hoof out of town in the other direction.

Lead dogged their heels for the first half mile. But they shook off pursuit in the gravel hills, circled around, and rejoined the Gulcher and his mob as they came fogging out of town.

"Everything's jake!" the Gulcher exulted. "We got the gold and we got the brat."

"But we left four men lead-drilled in the streets of Silverton," the Amarillo gunhawk reminded him harshly.

"All the more gold fer the rest of us," the Gulcher chopped.

"You can leave me out of it," Little Gulcher threw in. "I didn't ask to be rescued. I'm quittin'!"

CHAPTER VI

The Love Barrier

HIS words were like a bullet in the softness of the night. Deadly silence clamped down.

"You ongrateful whelp!" the Gulcher blared. "I spend my life trainin' you. I risk my life rescuin' you from a long prison stretch, and now you want to walk out on me!"

Little Gulcher stood his ground. "I'm appreciatin' all you done for me. The day'll come when I'll pay you back. But I don't want no more gun-hawkin' for mine. Four men lyin' dead is too much to pay for a handful of gold around. Hereafter I'm gettin' my gold peaceful."

"Peaceful, hell," the Gulcher roared. "You think anybody gets gold peaceful? You got to kill fer gold, whether you're on the side of the law or agin' it."

"Then I won't go out for gold," Little Gulcher said evenly. "I don't crave it much nohow. All I want is to live like other people in a town somewheres, and not like a wolf slinkin' in the hills."

"You ain't a wolf! You're a yellow, snivelin' coyote, by hell! But you got the wolf brand on you. You think town folks'll leave you live with 'em now? They'll gun you down the first time you show. And *I'll* gun you down the next time you squawk about runnin' out on me!"

"There won't be no next time," Little Gulcher said tightly.

Before the Old Man could make his lightning draw, before he could read Little Gulcher's resolute intent, the lad had slapped holster, lanced gun from leather, and was crouched in saddle, menacing the Gulcher with an unwavering gun muzzle.

Under the light of the first wan rays of the morning sun slanting over the rimrock, the Gulcher's face flamed in amazed anger. His little grizzly eyes glinted. Lips sucked against stained teeth. Fingers twitched.

Little Gulcher read his sure intent and he sent a bullet grooving the Old Man's knuckles. The gun echoes crashed flatly in the rocky hills.

"I ain't backin' down on this," Little Gulcher lashed. "You been tryin' to get me to kill. I'll kill! Draw agin' me and I'll kill *you!*"

The Gulcher's chunky face seemed to swell in his red anger. But he didn't draw.

"I'm stayin' here," Little Gulcher informed. "The rest of you—the whole kit-an'-boilin' of you—turn around and start ridin' uptrail. With your hands high. The first one that looks back, I'll leave him have a bullet dead-center."

Little Gulcher's proved skill with a six-gun stood him well. No one looked back. Not until they were far enough up the trail to make shooting a hazard.

Then, under the Gulcher's lashing, they all turned at once, wheeling their horses and raking the air with a leaden hail.

Little Gulcher was looking for it. He had swerved his own horse. Riding low in saddle, shooting back, he rocketed along, seeming to be pushed by the air-wash of their bullets. A bulking shoulder of granite hid him momentarily. When the Hawk's Roost hellions galloped around the turn, he had left the trail and was taking cover in the rock-jagged hills.

"Git him!" the Gulcher bellowed.

Their horses and their lead streaked after him. They chased him halfway back to Silverton. Then the Gulcher called a halt. He didn't want to tangle with a sheriff's posse. He and his gunmen turned and fogged back into the engulfing hills with their blood-stained gold.

Little Gulcher went on—toward Silverton and the yawning jail cell he had vacated.

HE didn't go prancing down the main street of town. Although he was coming back to show them they didn't need iron bars to hold him, he wasn't so simple as to believe they would take him on trust. Not at first sight.

There was one, however, whom he did expect to take him on trust. So in the early hours of morning, he entered town under cover of a cut-bank arroyo, rode into the sheriff's back yard up to the kitchen door, and called softly for Ruth.

She came running.

"You!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here? They'll kill you!"

She stopped suddenly. Her hand went to her throat. She drew back a little and the soft, excited glow in her eyes was replaced by an indefinable look. It might have been fear. It might have been loathing.

Her little foot stamped angrily. "Go away! I never want to see you again. Pretending to love me, pretending to want to live an honest life—and all the time plotting with your gunhawk pards for a jail break! Three men died in this town last night. One of them's lying in the house next door. Do you want to see him? You're not fit to look upon him! Go on back with the killers in the hills. Live like a wolf. Until an honest man's bullet cuts you down!"

"You don't understand," Little Gulcher said dazedly. "I didn't want to go with them. As soon as I could, I came back!"

She wouldn't listen. There were tears blinding her eyes. Her lips quivered. But her words were straight. "Go away! If all the men in town weren't out with the posse, I'd turn you over to them! Get out!"

She drew back and slammed the door in his face.

Because he was so crushed by her attitude, he didn't see the two men issue from the house across the way. Ruth hadn't been entirely correct when she said all the men had left town with the posse. Two men, the brother and the father of that one who lay dead next door, a victim of

the Gulcher's outlaw lead, had remained behind to comfort a wife and mother.

Hearing Ruth's angry talk, the two had stepped grimly out of the death room, six-guns snug in hand.

Slumped in saddle, Little Gulcher came alive at the instant the two men threw down. His hand streaked wildly for his own ready weapon. But he couldn't beat those gun hammers already down.

One of the bullets merely burned through his flapping vest. The other struck high in the chest, crunching through flesh and bone.

The third and fourth bullets were fired by Little Gulcher. One of them knocked a gun from hand. The other drilled an arm, destroying a perfect aim.

Just those two shots, and Little Gulcher was riding. Holding low in saddle, hoofing back dust and pebbles, dripping a trail of blood from his chest wound. Riding, and leaving behind a pale-faced girl at a window. Leaving behind love. Leaving behind life.

He was going home. To the only home he had ever known, the Gulcher's hideout at Hawk's Roost.

He couldn't live in the world of men. He had tried, refraining from killing at the risk of his own life. But they barred him. They were hounding him to the hills. All right, he wasn't a rock, a tree. He was a social creature. He needed the association of men. The only men in the hills were owl-hooters. Very well, he'd go back to his own.

But he'd shoot straight. And they'd better keep out of the way of his bullets. He wasn't shooting guns out of hand any longer.

CHAPTER VII

Killer's Choice

LITTLE GULCHER didn't go back to the Hawk's Roost. None of the outlaws did. The reason was that Sheriff Halloc's posse, dusting them with blaring lead, forced the pack to take cover where they could.

Little Gulcher heard the shooting from a long way off and his lips tightened grimly. The Old Man was in a bad spot. It was all because he had given up his trail advantage and turned back, pursuing his son halfway to town.

Little Gulcher headed his horse in the direction of the echoing gunfire. His place, he reasoned, was alongside his Old Man.

Riding along, he kept to cover as much as possible. He had applied rough first-aid to his bullet wound. It bled no longer, but each hoofbeat of his galloping horse splintered pain through his chest.

Nearing the scene of the shooting, his eyes widened a little. He knew this gray-walled canyon where his father was making a stand. It was the same canyon where he had met Ruth Halloc, the place where the sheriff of Rimrock County liked to fish.

"I throw little fish back into the water," the sheriff had said, and now he was going to be plenty sorry for doing so.

When the gunfire was an echoing throb in his ears, he eased out of saddle and proceeded afoot, holding to cover of outcropping granite and canyon chaparral. With six-gun snug in hand, lean body tense, he whipped along, like an avenging shadow.

A bullet splintered through willow branches overhead. Another slapped rock a little to his left. Little Gulcher crept on. He passed a dead man lying in a grotesque huddle, his glazed eyes looking into the sun, his blood a black stain on the clean granite. On every side now were the possemen, holding to rocky cover, shooting, ducking.

They were laying down lead. The canyon rocked to the gun thunder.

With the possemen watching ahead, intent on their big job of killing, Little Gulcher had hoped to work

close enough so he could make a running break for it and join the Old Man's party.

His plan didn't work. In a sideflung glance, one of the possemen recognized him, screamed savagely and lined down close lead. Two other men in position to see, cursed, swung guns around with muzzles blaring.

THE unexpected sight of Little Gulcher Gleeson in their midst unnerved them for an instant. They thought they were being flanked by a party of the outlaws. Their first shots at Little Gulcher were consequently wild.

There weren't any others except those first shots. Not from these men. Little Gulcher's face was a savage mask as his gun fanged in and out, blazing lead. But even now in spite of his resolution, he didn't kill. He meant to, but at the last instant something apart from him seemed to do the aiming. He shot two men in the shoulder, paralyzing their gunhands, and sent the third diving for cover with bullets grazing his granite boulder.

After that, the canyon was like hell bursting about him. Bullets from both sides slammed and whined, cutting rock chips through the air like grape-shot. Little Gulcher swerved, ducked, and twisted as he catapulted himself from cover to cover. His chest wound broke open. Blood sopped his shirt and he didn't know. He thought it was sweat. The canyon tilted under his wild, stabbing glances so that half the time the granite outcrops seemed to be rolling down on him.

But he went on, running the gun gantlet, with his knees buckling like rubber, breath wheezing, and his heart pounding.

He made it! Through all that lethal hail, he bludgeoned his way to the Gulcher's side and slumped behind a protecting rock.

When he got his breath back so that he could look up, the Gulcher was crouched there beside him.

"So you've come back," he rasped. "Knowed you would. Wolf blood won't stand gentlin'."

"How—how you holdin' out?" Little Gulcher gasped.

Gulcher Gleeson laughed harshly. There was murder in his red-rimmed eyes. "Out of ten men, I got two left, Dog-town and another'n. It's been a massacree! And it's all on account of you!"

"I'm with you now. I make four. We're holed in at a good spot. We'll take 'em."

"Yeah?" the Gulcher slashed. "Lot of help you'll be—"

"I ain't shootin' guns out of hand no more."

"You made your kill?" the Old Man demanded fiercely, and cursed when he read the answer on Little Gulcher's face.

"But I will!" Little Gulcher grimly promised.

"You will!" the Old Man snarled ominously. "I'll see to it."

HERE at the last, they *were* holed in at a good place. They held the attack off until night swooped into the canyon, blotting out everything but the saffron gun flares. For easier carrying, the Gulcher distributed the gold around, and they made a break to get away in the darkness.

The sheriff's men weren't fooled. The owl-hooters were caught in a deathly crossfire before they had crept three yards from cover. They lurched up, slammed back to their rock nest. Three of them did. Dog-town Arata was left outside, dead, drilled front and back.

"I gotta idea," the Gulcher muttered hoarsely against the ear of the grizzled old gunhawk who survived. "I'm gonna make a deal fer you and me with Clem Halloc."

"What about the kid?"

"The brat holds the bag. Here's

how. I've had a personal feud with the sheriff since way back. I'm gonna make a dicker with him. He gets the gold. We get our lives. There's more. I agree to meet him single-handed in showdown gun battle, which same he's been yellin' fer these last ten years."

"You right positive you can go agin' him?"

"I ain't, no. But here's the pay-off. I ain't figgerin' to go agan' him. I'm framin' the brat to it."

"Clem Halloc'll plumb kill your kid. I doubt they's a man in the mountains can draw agin' that old tarantula."

The Gulcher cursed, his thin lips back against his teeth. "I'd bet odds on the sheriff myself. But if my brat eats lead, it ain't no loss to me on account he's blood-shy anyhow. If he would happen to burn down the sheriff though, it'd be the makin' of him."

The Gulcher's little eyes in his beefy face glinted. "I got another reason why I want to see them two meet that I'm keepin' to myself."

All unconscious of the life-and-death drama building up with himself as the principal actor, Little Gulcher crouched thirty feet away, defending the opposite approach to the rock nest. But though he was in position to ward off an attack, he couldn't keep an occasional bullet from horneting through. Most of them slapped rock outside, but one, freighted with death, found a cranny in the barricade.

It also found the old gunhawk's heart.

This last one of the Old Man's owl-hooters died with scarcely a sound. He slumped in the darkness as though he were tired, and lay unmoving. And there were Big Gulcher and Little Gulcher facing alone the gun flashes that bloomed in the night.

Gulcher Gleeson hallooed into the darkness, demanding a parley. The sheriff didn't trust him enough to come out into the open, but he took his time and eased close with a small party, holding to rocky cover.

The Gulcher snarled his proposition. He had an ace in the hole. The sheriff had no way of knowing how complete the massacre had been.

"My men will be pickin' off some more of yours before you get all of us," the Gulcher hammered. "And you ain't sure to get us anyhow. The best way's fer you and me to meet like you been wantin'—gun to gun."

"What's your idee about the details?" the sheriff's voice came dryly.

"Soon's it gets light draw your men back. Spot 'em at each end of the canyon if you want. That way you don't need to be afraid of no double-cross from our side, seein' as you'll have the getaways covered."

The Gulcher's voice lowered to a harsh whisper. "I'll come out in plain sight and meet you in the canyon anywhere you say."

The sheriff grunted. "You know the lightnin'-blasted juniper near the crick in the first draw from here?"

"I know where you mean."

"Meet me there. We'll shoot on sight."

AFTER the sheriff and his man had crept back, Gulcher Gleeson met Little Gulcher in the center of the rock nest and said:

"You got in here under their guns in broad daylight. Takin' your time, inchin' along, you figger you could get out again while it's dark?"

"Reckon so. Why?"

"To back my play," the Gulcher growled, "in case of a double-cross. I'm meetin' Clem Halloc at sun-up in the first draw across the crick agin' the high cliff. I want you to be holed in on this side the crick at the lightnin'-blasted juniper to cover me if Halloc sends a gunner in from that direction."

"Count on me," Little Gulcher said tightly.

When gray morning light started

jumping cliffs and trees into relief, Little Gulcher was all set at the landmark juniper. With his bullet wound paining him, it had taken him most of the night to make the trip, crawling, to avoid being located by any of the sheriff's men. But he was here, waiting and watching.

There was no fearful pounding of his heart as in the old days. His gunhand had been proved fast and accurate. The knowledge made him calm.

Another thing contributed to his calmness. He was getting along with the Old Man at last. He and the Old Man, shoulder to shoulder, fighting together. He felt almost sentimental about it. In that moment Gulcher Gleeson appeared not in his true colors—a greedy brute, a bushwhacking murderer. He seemed, rather, to be an adventurer living a good life in spite of little men in little towns who would restrain him.

Sheriff Clem Halloc—a good man if there ever was one—appeared as a symbol of all the unbending forces which had crowded him to the dim trails. Little Gulcher winced now to remember his one-time worshipful admiration of the gray little frontier sheriff, and the passionate declaration:

"I wish I had been *your* son instead of Gulcher Gleeson's kid!"

Just one thing came to him this morning in its original colors. Ruth Halloc. No matter what she thought of him, he'd always love her. Her flushed, eager young face, the remembered glow in her eyes stirred him even now.

While he waited there, the sun blazed out, pouring its furnace redness over half the sky. It wasn't long until Little Gulcher saw the Old Man come into sight, walking openly. Just before he reached the juniper tree, the Old Man ducked suddenly out of view. When he showed again, he was hunched over, crossing the creek. Across there a granite cliff towered against the red sky. Against that slablike cliff the Gulcher crouched, waiting, too.

A CURIOUS tingling shot through Little Gulcher. It wasn't from fear. It was in the nature of a tuning process. The whole mountain valley seemed to be waiting with him for something to happen. A brooding hush was on the air. Not even a bird chirped. And the red sky, pressing down, foreshadowed blood.

A thought struck him then. What if Sheriff Hallock should burst into sight, not from this direction, but from around the cliff turn on the other side of the creek? The sheriff and the Old Man would see each other at the same instant. Their guns would line. Two bullets would blaze. And there would be a double death.

It was in the cards. They stood alone, gun chiefs both of them, one for the law and one against it. If they met, other things being equal, they would gun each other down.

Suddenly Little Gulcher went cold. It was happening. Not in his mind. In actuality.

Sheriff Halloc had rounded the turn, half spun, and crouched. His six-gun and the Gulcher's were lining on each other in fatal stabbing motion! Under that red sky, against the gray granite, two men would drop to their death.

Unless he—Little Gulcher—

He knew he was faster than either of these two. He could beat their lead with bullets of his own. The distance was too great to risk trying to shoot a gun out of hand. But not too great for positive killing.

One man he could kill that the other might live! Which should he kill, his father or—Ruth's father?

Blurring arm motion had accompanied Little Gulcher's flash of thought. His gun roared, cramming three shots out of six-gun muzzle almost as one. For the first time in his life, Little

Gulcher was pounding lead for a man's heart.

Fatal echoes rolled down the canyon, and there, under the red sky, against the gray cliff, a man lay crumpled, dying.

A dry sob broke from Little Gulcher's throat. His gunhand dropped limply to his side.

Words choked from his lips: "I've killed—my own father!"

THE rattle of a dying man's breath sounded in the ears of Little Gulcher and Sheriff Halloc as they bent over Gulcher Gleeson.

Little Gulcher's face was bleak, and as gray as the towering granite cliff that would become a tombstone slab for the Old Man.

The sheriff's hand reached out, closed gently on Little Gulcher's arm.

"Why did you do it, lad? Why did you choose me to live?"

"All I know," Little Gulcher said dully, "is, there at the last, the gun poked out at him instead of you. It didn't seem like I had anything to do with it. I reckon it must be—in spite of everything—it's a man like you, 'stead of a man like him, I'd like to 'a' had for my father. But he's my father an' I killed him!"

"God won't be blamin' you for it, lad. Look at it this way, as if two men were drownin'. You can't swim 'em both out. You can only save one. You make your choice which one, and you haven't killed no one—jus' saved one, see?"

"Look," Little Gulcher cut, "he's comin' conscious!"

It was true. The outlaw's cruel little eyes blinked up at them with recognition. Thin lips relaxed from against the teeth, formed painful words.

"It's a good laugh fer somebody, ain't it? I spend all my life tryin' to get you to kill somebody—and when you do—you kill me!"

Little Gulcher uttered one stricken word: "Father!"

A facial contortion that might have been a grin passed over the Gulcher's face. "Mebbe I had it comin'. I framed it fer the sheriff to meet you instead of me. I come over this side the crick to have a grandstand seat. But I reckon Clem, the old hellhound, he didn't trust me complete. He showed up this side the crick too—and I'm the one the joke's on."

A spasm of coughing racked the Gulcher's frame. When he could speak again his voice was weaker.

"Ain't got much time," he rasped. "Listen close. Hate don't seem noways important to me now. I'm gonna see can I undo in a minute some evil I been plenty years in the buildin'. I'm talkin' to you, Clem. You mind eighteen years ago—a stage stick-up, an' your wife killed by a stray bullet?"

The sheriff started. "Go on," he said tensely.

"I reckon you never found out, but I was promotin' the stick-up. Another thing you never knowed was about your two-year-old kid. He never got left fer wolves to eat, like you thought. I took him. I hated your guts, Clem, fer a lot of reasons that ain't important now. I took your kid. And now"—the outlaw's pudgy hand waved weakly in the direction of Little Gulcher—"I give him back to you."

The sheriff and Little Gulcher stared long at each other, blue eyes burning into blue. Father and son, they stared, and the heartbeat of the world was in their ears, and a glimmering knowledge of many things beyond their ken.

Little Gulcher remembered again his wish that the gray little sheriff could be his father. Here at the last, with everything gone hopeless, the impossible had happened—the sheriff *was* his father.

About the killing, it was a grim, fantastic way to look at it, but—by killing his father he had saved him.

The dying man spoke once more in

words barely audible. The grimace on his chunky face was meant for a grin.

"The kid wasn't worth a hoot on the owl-hoot, Clem. Mebbe—he'll make you a good man fer the law."

They buried the Gulcher where he lay, with the towering granite cliff for a headstone.

Riding out of the canyon with the sheriff, Little Gulcher stopped his horse suddenly dead still on the trail. There was a shocked expression on his face.

"Look," he said, "if I'm your son, then that makes Ruth my sister!"

The sheriff looked back and grinned. "I was waitin' for you to catch up with that one! It don't make her your sister on account when I lost you I took her to raise. I adopted a girl baby 'stead of a boy. It seemed to hold your mother's memory some closer to me."

Little Gulcher took a deep breath. "Then she ain't—what you might say —in our family atall!"

The sheriff's eyes were twinkling. "I'll tell you a secret, son, an' I know it for a fact—she'd like to be."

Little Gulcher leaned forward in saddle. "I'll beat you home, dad!"

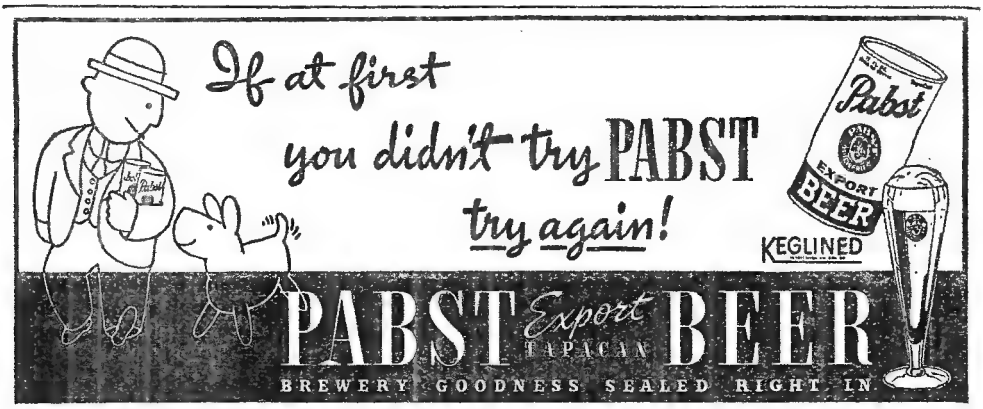
THE DEER OVEN MINE

A CRAVING for roasted deer meat was responsible for the finding of the Trojan Mine in Calaveras County, California. Thus did two German gardeners meet up with Lady Luck in the winter of 1865, and by the turn of a shovel discover fortunes for themselves.

The two gardeners, Herman Becker and Laurence Trimmer, raised vegetables in the summer for the mining camps, and in the winter they went into the mountains to gather oak wood for fuel for the camps. While they were accumulating the fuel, they ate and slept in an abandoned miner's cabin.

They acquired a piece of deer meat and built a bonfire of brush preparatory to baking it. The fire melted a hole in the snow, which was piled two feet high around them. They dug two feet down into the earth to make an oven, at that depth striking rock. The shovel broke off a piece of the rock, and while the meat was roasting in its buried oven, they examined the rock, finding it rich in gold.

A Placerville assayer determined that the rock would yield $600 worth of gold per ton. In the end the Germans sold the mine for $70,000 apiece to a group of Boston buyers, to whom the mine netted $30,000 apiece for years.



This advertisement is not intended to offer alcoholic beverages for sale or delivery in any state or community where the advertising, sale or use thereof is unlawful.

Invitation to the Noose

Young Dean had a quick-trigger temper. And that fiery temper was forged into a cold-decked double-cross that brought six-gun disaster to the girl he loved.

By ORLANDO RIGONI

Author of "The Cain Brand"

IMELDA CARLOCK stood at the open door of the cabin, the snow swirling about her booted feet like froth. The harsh voice of the wind struck at her like a whip. There was ice on the wide roof of the cold cabin; ice on the dirty windows—and there was ice in her throbbing heart.

Even her winsome face seemed cold and brittle and hard. Her eyes were the only warm things in that whole, tense scene, and they stared like hot coals at the body of the man lying so grotesquely upon the cabin floor.

Imelda's little mouth was tight and grim. She didn't even have to enter the cabin to piece that crime together. The raw, gaping wound in the man's chest told her the story. There was only one gun in Little Valley that could have made that wound; there was only one gun that could have mutilated a man like that with a single shot.

Dean Morgan's seven millimeter

Mannlicher had done that killing. Grimly, she admitted that truth, even as it hacked at her soul like a knife. Dean had bought that gun from a gypsy who had been traveling through the little town of Denker. There wasn't another gun like it in the whole of the Poison River country.

Frantically, she tried to compose her thoughts. It wasn't an easy task. Dean meant everything in life to her. He had been building up his small spread against the day when they should be married, and now, this. She didn't doubt that Dean had done the killing. He had a quick, consuming temper and he held little love for Harvey Blake, the dead man. But she had never dreamed that Dean would carry the fight this far.

Her hands clenched tightly. In letting his wild temper get the better of him, he had wrecked her whole life. She would suffer more than that dead man on the floor. It wasn't right! It wasn't fair!

Yet, even in her hour of distress, she knew that she had to protect Dean. How? How could she protect him? Fiercely, she told herself that she'd take the blame for the killing. It would be easier for a woman to get away with such a thing. Everybody knew that Dean wanted the upper end of Poison River Valley to build up his range. Harvey had always claimed that range, although he hadn't enough stock to use it. The men of Denker didn't take kindly to killings over range. Well, she'd take the blame. There were many things for which a woman could kill with impunity.

She turned from that door and her body felt heavy, as though it was weighted down. She swung to the saddle of her gray horse and hunched her head against the biting wind. She didn't head straight for Denker. She needed advice. She had to be sure of herself.

She urged her horse along the snow-covered trail toward old Philo Grimes' homestead. Philo was an old man. To Imelda he had always seemed old. Even when she was a little child his hair had been gray and he had always seemed so wise. Now, in her perplexity, she turned to him for solace.

She reached the long ridge leading up to the shanty on the hill. She turned into the littered door yard and dismounted. The wind lashed at her as she knocked upon the door. There was no answer to her knock. She called out, and tried the catch. The door opened easily. She called softly, "Philo—Philo!"

It is a peculiar circumstance of life that a mind can live an age in the passing of a second. Imelda's mind did that very thing as she listened for that slow, drawling voice to answer her. She was thinking of the time Philo had helped her raise two pet rabbits—of the time he had saved her from the wildly stampeding cattle at the fall crossing of the Poison River.

Also he had taught her the wisdom of the desert and the voices of the night. He was wise. He could give her such counsel as she required.

She was conscious, suddenly, of the tense stillness about her. With a catch in her throat, she called again, "Philo!"

No answer.

She pushed cautiously into the one shabby room, and a cry of pain and horror leaped from her constricted throat. Philo was lying upon the floor in a pool of dried blood. His old, gentle face was calm and white and rigid. His wise, deep eyes were staring at the wall without seeing it. His gun lay close by him with one shell fired.

For one moment of tense disbelief, she stood swaying on her weakened legs. Then she moved across that floor like a shadow. She flung herself at the dead man's side and sobbed wildly, "Philo—Philo, I need you. Philo!"

Her small, strong hands touched his pallid face. It was cold, that face; cold as the icicles that hung like dried bones from the eaves of the cabin. She got up, breathing hard. She was on her own now—it was up to her to chart her course.

Then her eyes saw the big gun lying against the sill of the opened window. It was as though that gun had been dropped there in haste. Upon the frozen crust of snow that clung to the sill was the red stain of blood.

Grimly, she walked outside. She traced that blood like spilled rubies across the snow to where it disappeared in a flurry of half buried hoofprints.

She sat down on the snow as though the strength had suddenly left her slim body. For ten measured minutes she sat there like a fixed thing. She forgot the cold—forgot the late hour. She was trying to convince herself that Philo was dead—that Dean Morgan's gun had done the killing.

She shook herself fiercely as though emerging from some fantastic dream. Wearily she got up and went to her horse. She took the big rifle with her. As she rode toward the little town of Denker, hot thoughts flared and took form in her head.

She had to save Dean, now. With Philo dead, Dean was all she had left. It was preposterous to think that Dean had done the killings, but the evidence was all against him. No man owned such a gun as this, excepting Dean, and he guarded that gun carefully, never loaning it to a curious neighbor.

All right, she had the gun. She'd take the blame for the killings until Dean could clear himself. She laughed dryly, an unpleasant laugh. It was foolish to believe that the men of Denker would believe that she killed Philo. She could claim it was an accident—could say that they argued over that other killing.

Even that seemed a flimsy story, yet she had to insist upon its truth to give Dean a chance to find the real killer of Harvey Blake. She rehearsed the thing in her mind a dozen times as she rode over the windswept hogback of Owlhoot Pass. She repeated it aloud as she rode up the deserted, twisting street of Denker.

She swung down before Indian Bill's Paradise, a gaudy gambling parlor that boasted as its clients all of the bad and some of the good of Denker. With a shudder that wasn't altogether because of the cold wind that bit at her flesh, she dismounted. For a moment she stood on the walk, staring at the shabby front of the Paradise. The windows seemed to be bleary eyes, staring at her. The door seemed to be a huge mouth waiting to swallow her.

With a straightening of her shoulders, she pushed into the place. The hum and confusion died as the men realized that the visitor was Imelda Carlock. She was seldom seen in the Paradise. Something terrible in her very posture seemed to strike across that room and hold those men rigid.

The faro dealer stopped in the middle of the deal, mulling his tobacco across his mouth. The dice lay with snake-eyes showing upon the green felt. Even the tin-pan piano stopped its tom-tom beat and the gaudy girls backed away from her in respect to her purity.

Imelda bit her lip until the blood ran salty into her mouth. The heavy gun fell from her stiff fingers and clattered at her feet as though clamoring for attention.

"I've just killed Harvey Blake," she told them in a flat, dead voice.

The gasp of the men shattered that silence. A grumble of surprise rolled like surf across that room.

Imelda felt herself swaying weakly. She caught herself with an effort. "I was arguing with Philo about the killing, and shot him, accidentally!" The last was a broken scream.

The silence that followed that scream was uncanny. She stared wildly about her. The faces in that gloom looked like masks of plaster. Why didn't they say something? Why didn't they speak? Why did they all stand there staring at her? She'd rather that they curse her—lay rough hands upon her.

Frantically, she cried, "What are you going to do about it?"

Denker didn't boast a sheriff. Every man took it upon himself to enforce the crude justice of the range. If there was any one of them who might act as spokesman for the law, it was Sam Hilton, the barkeep. He knew all of the men of Denker, knew their weaknesses and their virtues. Now, he stepped toward her, putting his gnarled hand gently upon her arm.

"Reckon, gal, we hain't a-goin' tuh do nothin'—not a damned thing. Yore motives might be fine an' upstandin', miss, but they're a mite off the truth trail. Reckon yuh didn't kill neither o' them victims."

Imelda's face blanched. She felt her heart jump in her breast. "What do you mean, Sam?"

"I mean that we already heered o' them killings. Ike Snell, who rides for Turlock, brung us the news. Didn't pick up thet gun, 'cause he figgered it'd make a better clue where it was," Sam explained.

Imelda's face tightened. So they thought they'd fasten the crimes on Dean, did they? She said evenly, "I told you I killed them, Sam."

Sam's eyes squinted. "Why'd you want tuh kill them rannies fer? Philo was next kin tuh a mother tuh yuh, gal."

"I told you it was an accident, my killing Philo. I killed Blake because —because . . . oh, isn't it enough that I confess?"

Sam smiled gently. "No, gal, it ain't. Fact is, we already traced the killer plumb certain."

She swallowed hard. What did they know? Whom did they suspect? She stared at the circle of white faces. They seemed to become a pack of devouring beasts. She could see the blood lust in their eyes. That was it! Why hadn't she noticed it before? They were getting ready for a lynching!

She could see Ike Snell, lean as a skeleton, skulking back in the crowd. In a hushed voice that carried across that room, she asked, "Where's Turlock?"

She didn't trust Turlock. Never had. He was a loud, boisterous man, with a mule laugh and shifty eyes. He had always been a trouble maker, ever since Ewing and his sheep had been driven from the Poison River Range.

Sam said slowly, "Ain't yuh heered, miss? Ewing is coming back on the Poison. He's enterin' by the lower breaks beyond the Water Pocket Fold. Coming in by way of Turlock's range, and Turlock is out tryin' tuh block him."

"You believe that?" she gasped with a little panic. The thought of Ewing coming back frightened her. Years before he had run his woolies across the Poison Range until the grass had been trampled to the roots. There had been a terrible war to drive him out. Men had died in that war—even her own brother. Now Ewing was coming back. Could the killings she had just witnessed be connected up with his coming?

She asked again, "Where's Turlock?"

As though in answer to that question, the door flung in. Across the dim room crept old Sarah. Sarah was old, and gnarled, and gray. She had a witch's face and a saint's heart. Coupled with that was a conscience that forbade compromise with justice.

Her snagged teeth showed between her parted lips. "I reckon I've got the man you brought the charges against fixed up proper, Sam. I got the blood stopped, like you asked me to, but I can't see the sense in saving him for a lynching."

Imelda's eyes burned upon the old woman. She was afraid to form the question in her mind. She forced it out, like cattle are prodded through a chute.

"Whom — whom do you mean, Sarah?"

Sarah turned toward her, and her sunken eyes were soft. "It's going to be a mite hard on you, my child. You shouldn't have come here. I've washed my hands of it. These men will have his blood on their—"

Imelda fought the panic from her breast. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

The door again answered her question. Dean Morgan came through that door. Imelda's eyes clung to him. She wanted to throw herself in his arms—to have him hold her against the world. But she couldn't move. His right arm was bound up, swinging in a sling. There was blood on his clothing. So he had done that killing after all. Turning swiftly toward the men, she cried, "I did kill Blake and Philo—I did!"

A tense silence followed her outburst. Dean was walking across the floor toward her. His big, left hand gripped her shoulder hard. She could feel the very strength of him flow into her own body. Before all those men, he stooped from his six-feet-three, and kissed her five-feet-two full on the lips.

Like fire, that kiss was, igniting her heart. She could hear his words flowing across that room evenly, unhurried.

"Reckon I don't know what all this stewin's about, men, but the gal's speakin' a lie. She didn't kill anybody!"

Ike Snell, like a wolf, lean with famine, crawled from the shifting men. His sharp face twisted into a sneer. "So yuh admit yuh killed them, Morgan? That's more'n I give you credit for."

"Yo're speaking riddles, Ike," Dean said softly.

Ike Snell turned toward the restless men. There were rough men in that mob, to whom life was a precarious thing—a cheap thing to be taken on the least provocation. "He's tryin' tuh skin out, men. Me an' Turlock seen that killin'. Philo was with Morgan when he killed Blake. Philo ran out. Morgan chased him tuh his shanty an' killed him tuh close his mouth. But sometimes dead men talk louder'n words!"

"It's all a lie—a crazy lie!" Dean cried.

Snell whirled on him. "All right, then. The gal admits she done the killing. We'll let her pay for it. Petticoats don't change the code of justice. A life fer a life!"

Imelda crouched back as though she had been struck. Dean turned and stared at her. His eyes were soft and questioning.

He said, dully, "All right, I done it. Let the gal get out o' here. Let her go, then we'll argue this thing out, Ike Snell!"

There was a low undertone of anger rumbling across that smoke wreathed room. Imelda could feel the imminence of drama. She cried again, "Where's Turlock?"

Ike grinned evilly. "He might be down at Bridge's Crossing, sister. But he won't make no fine difference in this."

Ike whirled upon the men to whip them into frenzy. Imelda knew this, and turned like a driven thing and pushed out the batwing doors. The icy wind hit her in the face like an iron drawn from a forge. It burned and ate into her flesh with its intense cold. She didn't notice it. She leaped to her cowering pony. Turlock knew the answer to the riddle. He knew who killed those men—knew that Dean Morgan was innocent of their blood. She was sure of it!

Like a phantom she rode from the town. Down the long trail toward Bridge's Crossing, the little town that crouched like a beaten thing in

the narrow neck of Bottle Canyon. If Turlock was there, she'd find him!

The snow whipped past her like the garments of a ghost. Faster she rode, and faster. Hell was brewing on the Poison Range. Ewing had come back, and Ewing was a man who didn't like defeat. He had been driven from that range with blood. Now he had returned for vengeance.

She passed the stunted trees on the trail to the Water Pocket Fold. The steam rose like smoke from the flanks of her laboring mount. The whiskers on his puffing nostrils turned white with frost. She could feel her own face stiffen and hurt with the cold. Still she lashed her horse toward Bridge's Crossing!

Her mind was a froth of thoughts. Thoughts that plagued her. How could they accuse Dean of the crimes? She felt her heart sicken as she remembered that gun, and Dean's bandaged hand. The evidence was against him, yet she knew now that he hadn't done those killings. He might have killed Blake in a fit of rage, but Philo—never! Suddenly a strange thunder struck at her ears.

She felt her horse lurch under her. Her eyes went wide. Before her eyes was the Poison River, but it wasn't a river any more. She had expected a solid ribbon of ice on which she might make a crossing. Instead, she found a hell of broken ice and frosty spray that defied her.

For one tense minute, she sat like a frozen thing in that howling turmoil of ice and wind and snow. Far below her, she could see the huge blocks of ice, jamming up against the bend in the river. It was blocking the flow of the flood, and the icy water was backing up behind it into a tossing lake.

Even as she stared at that picture, she could see the black shadow of a man, stumbling through the whipping snow. She cried sharply to him, and he staggered toward her.

"Miss — Miss Imelda — Ewing blasted the river! He's drivin' his woolies this way, an' before him, he's stampedin' the Poison Range cows from the winter feedin' ground! He needs that ground for his sheep. . . ." The man was Jardine, an old trapper, weary with age.

Imelda could hear that stampede then. It came like a low rumbling surf, mingling with the thunder of the broken ice. What should she do? The man before her was spent and without a horse. Below that dam of ice lay Bridge's Crossing. That ice couldn't hold that water for very long. When it should let go the torrent of cold water would strike at the five hundred souls in the little town, and hammer them to death like a club.

What should she do? She had come to find Turlock and take him back to Denker to save Dean Morgan.

Instinctively she cried at Jardine, "Have you seen Turlock?"

Jardine nodded his gray head. "He's with Ewing, I reckon—they figger tuh gun the ranchers off the Poison an' take it for themselves!"

Ewing was striking swiftly. She could see it all now. Blake and Philo were dead. Dean was in the hands of a hostile mob, led by the evil Ike Snell. The Poison cattle were stampeding toward the flood, and Bridge's Crossing lay in the shadow of certain death. Death that would strike it down like a thief in the night, unless —unless . . .

She knew, suddenly, just what she had to do. To desert Dean at this time meant deserting her own heart, yet there was a higher duty—there were children and women and cripples in Bridge's Crossing, and she alone could save them!

Almost without knowing it, she was riding down river. As she lashed her horse through the driven snow, she could see the mad cattle bearing down upon her. She stiffened in the saddle. She cried fiercely to her mount to escape that trap. The

cattle would hurl them into the river —would trample them and consume them in their mad, insane flight!

Swifter and swifter she rode. The long black line of rushing cows roared at her like a wall. She dared not think. Softly, she whispered a prayer. They were half way across that wall of thunder—two-thirds of the way!

It was then that her horse fell. Fell in the path of the approaching cows, right upon the brink of the flood! Imelda refused to become frightened. She needed her wits—her mind. She forced her horse to lie still like a black splotch of ink against the white snow. The cows rushed around them! Perhaps it was that black mound in a world of white that split them. They did split, and Imelda, wide-eyed, watched them crash past on either side like moving walls of thunder!

Then she saw and heard an awful thing that must cling to her memory until death. That stampede struck the turgid water. There was no stopping that relentless rush. The cattle in front were pushed into the ice pack to be battered into a bawling frenzy that struck terror to Imelda's heart.

Dazed, she saw the last of the cattle flash past her as they spread out like backwater against the side of the river. Trembling a little in her panic, she mounted and started again toward Bridge's Crossing.

She reached the still town that crouched like a beaten thing in the narrow neck of Bottle Canyon. Dusk was striking down across the huddled shacks that looked like mounds of snow. She raced through the streets, crying the warning!

The people greeted her like frightened animals. Young and old, sick and well, bundled in blankets and coats they ran, or limped, or crept, or were carried up the side of the hill in the back of the little town.

Above the babble of voices, even, could be heard the shock as the ice dam burst! Imelda felt that awful crash strike at her very soul. She stared back at the deserted town, and a great hand seemed to grasp her heart.

In the middle of the deserted village stood Lou Miller, old and gray, the widow of Sandy Miller who had died but a week before. Her hair was blowing into her face. Her lips were drawn back off her teeth in her frenzy, and her fisted hands were lifted above her head. She was crying defiance at the forces of nature.

Imelda moved, then. Swiftly, mechanically, she slid down that steep mountain on foot. So intent was she upon the task before her, that she failed to hear the ominous thunder of guns slashing through the sound of the tumbling flood. She was unaware of the gunfight that was converging on the town, until she was upon the main street and heading across toward the crazed old woman.

Then she saw them. Ewing, Turlock, and the lean Ike Snell! They were fleeing before the vengeful guns of Denker! Leading those guns, was Dean Morgan!

What had happened? She couldn't know and there wasn't time to find out. Already the flood was crashing into the outskirts of the little town. Feeling the imminence of danger, she felt for her pearl-handled thirty-eight. She snatched it into her cold hand as she ran into the street.

"Mrs. Miller—Mrs. Miller!" she cried frantically.

Lou Miller didn't hear. She was facing the three men riding down that street, and she stood there to block their passage! Imelda felt her blood stop in her pulses. Like a picture that scene was, like a picture of stark drama. Then, suddenly, hell broke about her!

The flood was crashing through the town! The cakes of ice hammered like battering rams into the flimsy shacks, flattening them! Imelda could hear Ewing crying:

"Get outta my way, yuh old hag—get out!"

To be caught in that street by the flood meant certain detah. Imelda knew that, and Ewing and his companions knew that. Imelda could see Turlock plainly, now. She could see the splotch of blood on his side and the crude bandages that bound up his shoulder. Instantly she knew the truth. Turlock had done those killings!

At the same instant, Ewing drew his gun, and Ike drew his gun. Both men were intent upon clearing that street of the old woman who meant to interfere with their escape. Imelda stiffened. Her own gun lifted. She knew she could get only one of those killers, before they must kill old Lou Miller!

Swiftly she fired! A double blast of thunder reached her ears. She saw old Lou Miller fall. She saw Ewing pitch forward on his horse, and slide to the ground. To her dismay, she saw Ike Snell fall with a foot caught in the stirrup of his bolting horse. And she saw Turlock sitting upon his gelding with a smoking gun in his giant's hand! Turlock had tried to save Lou! He had killed Ewing, even as Imelda had killed Ike Snell!

Then the flood struck them! Imelda braced herself against the first swirling onslaught of water. She tried to get back to safety. She saw Turlock spur his horse forward, and pick Lou Miller's limp form from danger and swiftly ride with it before the roaring flood.

After that, Imelda's mind became confused. She could feel the very life buffeted from her slim body by the hammering ice. She fought madly, only half conscious, toward the hillside and safety. She knew she could never make it—never. . . .

At that moment of necessity, a strong arm scooped her from the water. She was lifted to the back of a fighting, squealing horse. She was carried slowly from the mad rush of water. The next thing she knew, she was lying in the soft, clinging snow and looking up into the strained, but smiling face of Dean Morgan!

"It's all right, honey," Dean was saying softly, "reckon we busted Ewing's game wide open before it took fruit. I had a run-in with Ewing afore I showed up in Denker today. I got nipped in the arm in the argument. I went to Denker for help to fight Ewing, an' they was all for hangin' me on the testimony o' Ike Snell. By the time I'd convinced 'em that I didn't kill Blake an' Philo, you was gone. Reckon yuh know the rest."

Imelda had seen Turlock risk his life to save the withered figure of Lou Miller. "Who—who did kill Philo?"

Before Dean could answer, Sam Hilton came over. "Turlock's askin' for yuh, Miss Imelda," he said slowly.

Clinging to Dean like a girl who has suddenly found life good, she crept over to where Turlock lay beside the reviving form of old Lou Miller.

"Reckon — reckon I'm done for, miss. I'm not askin' forgiveness—not even expectin' no praise for savin' Lou Miller. I saved her 'cause Sandy Miller was my friend. I—I just want tuh—tuh tell you that it was me who killed Blake an'—an' Philo. Ewing made me a fine offer for that job o' work. I stole Morgan's big gun tuh throw suspicion on him. Philo came along an' seen that killin'. I followed Philo an' shot him tuh close his mouth. He plugged me as he dropped. The wound has—has broke open again. I—I can't last long. Reckon Philo has got even. . . ."

Imelda turned her face from that still figure of death. Even Turlock had a touch of decency that bound him to friends. She pressed close to Dean, until she could feel the very warmth of his body. Her eyes lost their look of terror as she gazed upon life and found it suddenly good, and full of promise.

The M-P News Flash

PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS, INC 67 W. 44TH ST., N.Y.C.

JUNE, 1936

ANNOUNCING THE "SPECIAL WINNERS" OF OUR NEW DEAL CONTEST!

SINCE announcement of our "New Deal Contest" in our February books—whereby all who entered were to receive a prize—entries and mail continued to pour into our office right up to the closing hour of the contest. Were we pleased with the results? You might just as well ask, "Does a duck like water?" Folks, we were more than pleased, even though it meant the burning of large quantities of "midnight oil" in checking over the thousands of entries, which far exceeded our fondest expectations.

But you readers aren't interested in a lot of chatter—you want to know who won those ten yearly subscriptions to M-P books, so without further ado, here are those, who in the opinion of the judges, sent in the ten best paragraphs using the titles of the various magazines comprising the M-P line:

FLYING ACES subscriptions to Mrs. Wm. Rogers, 2366 Los Angeles Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa., and Mrs. Dean Hausen, R.F.D. No. 1, Box No. 179, Provo, Utah. **WESTERN ACES** to Miss Catherine M. Kalber, 22 McKee St., East Hartford, Conn.; **SECRET AGENT X** to Mr. Harry W. Jones, 909 Oriental Ave., Collingswood, N. J.; **GOLD SEAL DETECTIVE** to Mr. Vernon Blowers, Silver Springs, N. Y.; **LOVE FICTION MONTHLY** to Miss Audrey Grigsby, 1336 Third Ave., Terre Haute, Ind., and **ACE SPORTS** subscriptions to Messrs. Robert Stevenson, Gheen, Minn.; Charles Rutherford, Pioneer, Tex.; George Skoff, Box No. 22, Oakdale, Pa., and George D. Kittredge, Jr., Box No. 4, So. Lyndeborough, N. H.

In congratulating the subscription winners, we wish to assure all who entered our contest that the selection of the major prize winners was not an easy task. Only after long and careful deliberation were the ten best entries finally picked and the subscriptions entered. And in these closing lines we're glad that it is not necessary to console the "losers," for there are none. In addition to awarding the ten subscriptions, a prize has been mailed to every person who entered. We wish to collectively thank those in the vast army of M-P readers who entered and we're particularly grateful for the many fine letters in appreciation of our various magazines. Thanks again, everybody — cheerio, good luck and happy reading!

Highlights of the M-P Group—

FROM the all-ace line-up in M-P books this month, it is indeed evident that our writers have not been affected with "spring fever." Every story is brim-full of swift moving action and the books are just chock-full of the best reading with which to start the spring season.

WESTERN TRAILS opens with "Kid Thunderbolt," a gripping "Jingle" novelet by Frederick C. Davis, while Clyde A. Warden tells a great "Bert Little" adventure—"Boot-Hill Carnival." "Destiny Rides the Lobo Pass" is a thrilling action novelet by Peter Germane. L. P. Holmes, Carl McK. Saunders, Phil Richards and others tell yarns of the range and owl-hoot.

"Holsters of Hidden Valley," by W. D. Hoffman, in **RED SEAL WESTERN**, is a Western feud story, replete with six-gun action and romance that will hold you spellbound, while Laurence Keating's "Crimson Cavalcade" is a "Peach" of a story centered around a young deputy's battle against a band of rangeland renegades. Of course these are only two of the fine array of stories in store for you in this issue, but they alone are worth the price of the book.

SECRET AGENT X has the "Subterranean Scourge"—a new "Secret Agent X" novel by Brandt House. "Crucibles of the Damned" is a "Ravenwood" thriller, by Frederick C. Davis, while James Perley Hughes tells of "Horror Houseboat." In addition, stories by Norman A. Daniels and others complete as fine an issue of **SECRET AGENT X** as ever graced the newsstands.

"The Murder Deadline," a gripping "Paul Kirk" novelet by Frederick C. Davis is to be found in **TEN DETECTIVE ACES.** In this issue also is "The Kiss of Korma," another fine "Wade Hammond" mystery story. Also, there's a "Captain Murdock" novelet by Carl McK. Saunders; a "Dizzy Duo" mirthquake by Joe Archibald, plus six other complete detective stories.

ACE SPORTS crashes through with "The Bluegrass Slugger," a great baseball novel by Joe Archibald. The "Hayshaker Harrier" is one of Alexis Rossoff's best, while Robert S. Fenton tells a thrill-packed boxing yarn—"Fists of Fate." There are also a host of other fine sports stories by ace writers.

FLYING ACES hits the ceiling with a weird Keyhoe story; a rollicking funny-bone tickler—"Sky Finance" by Joe Archibald, and "Flight-Deck Fury," a new mystery thriller by Arch Whitehouse. Then—in more serious vein, there's a treatise by C. B. Shaninger—formerly of the Lafayette Escadrille—dealing with "The Student Wins His Wings—THEN and NOW," while Ace McCoy, **FLYING ACES'** own flight instructor, compares military flying training in '17 with that of today. Add to the above, **FLYING ACES'** superior model building section and you have the best rounded out flying book published.

LOVE FICTION MONTHLY is more thrilling and glamorous than ever! You must not miss "Vacation Vamp" by Vina Lawrence under any circumstances—it's a great story! In addition there are a host of other splendid pulsating presentations by Ethel Murphy, Helen Ahern, Lisbeth Walter and others of your favorite writers. And don't forget—Alma Portegal gives you news of screeen celebrities that is news in "Hollywood Highlights." All in all, this issue of **LOVE FICTION** is one you'll not forget in a hurry.

Really, we could go on and on, telling you of the fine treats in store for you in these great issues, but our space is limited and we must call a halt. However, we've given you the highlights of the books offering you the greatest value on the newsstands—the magazines comprising the M-P line.

BULLET

CHAPTER I

Colt Law

A MAN knows when he's dying. Destiny seems to draw the dark veil a little to one side, lets him get a glimpse of the vast silence awaiting him beyond. Fear leaves him then—if he's a man who has grappled a hard life with ready hands and had the courage to hold fast to his principles.

Old Arco Drewett's life had not been easy. He had started from scratch as an orphaned kid in a hard country. And Fate had seemed to take a cruel delight in giving him vicious prods, knocking down the props of his carefully built plans. He had built again, doggedly, tenaciously, his will only toughened by adversity. And he had shaped a man's place for himself.

Pretty much of a man, was old Arco Drewett. Little, spare-framed, nearly bald, with faded blue eyes and stooped shoulders—but a man. Heart and plain guts had made up for his lack of size.

But Fate would prod him no more. Old Arco Drewett was dying. He knew it. And he knew fear—but not of death. His faded eyes fastened on the fair young head bent over his chest. His daughter, Lila, his only child, his only kin. She was trying to stop the flow of blood from the bullet hole in his chest.

The attempt was useless, but he hadn't the heart to tell her so. She didn't know he was dying—or did she? There was a queer, stricken look in her eyes. She had seen him pretty badly shot up before, but she hadn't looked just like that.

He looked about him. Blazing blue sky, beetling rocks, parched sand, and a pair of black buzzards hovering overhead. Looked real peaceful. The Tombstone Hills—good name that, considering. He was glad his strength had held him in the saddle long

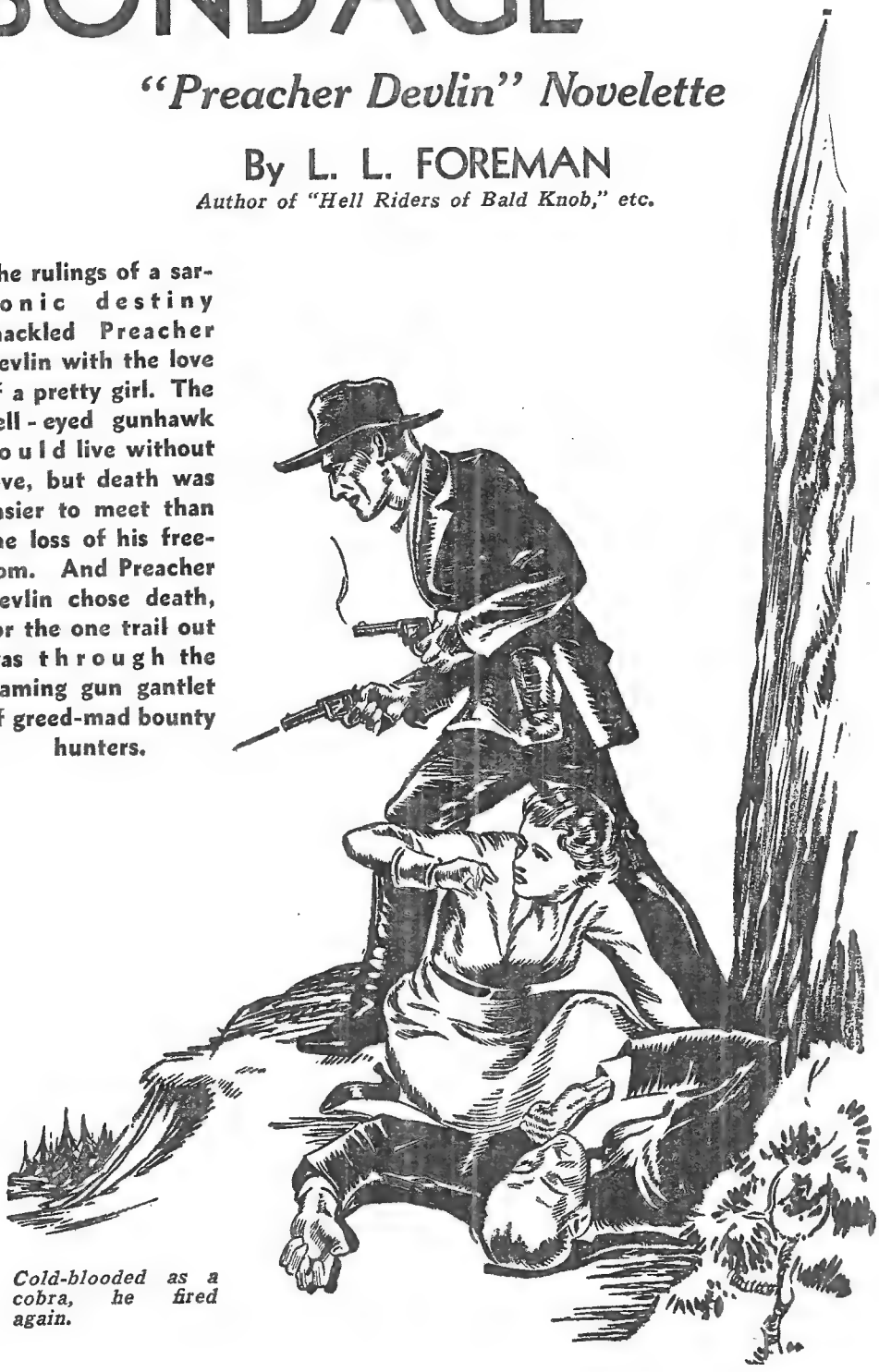
BONDAGE

"Preacher Devlin" Novelette

By L. L. FOREMAN

Author of "Hell Riders of Bald Knob," etc.

The rulings of a sardonic destiny shackled Preacher Devlin with the love of a pretty girl. The hell-eyed gunhawk could live without love, but death was easier to meet than the loss of his freedom. And Preacher Devlin chose death, for the one trail out was through the flaming gun gantlet of greed-mad bounty hunters.



Cold-blooded as a cobra, he fired again.

enough to get up here. But he wished he could hurry up and die now. Then Lila could maybe get away before the posse caught up.

He watched his daughter as she left his side to take a quick peek down the south slope. He saw her start a little, and draw back. She returned and picked up her rifle.

"They're coming, Dad," she said evenly. "Three of them, working their way up on foot. Maybe more—I don't know."

Her quiet tone and air of calm efficiency contrasted oddly with her appearance. Lila Drewett looked softly feminine, very young, very lovely. Life in a raw country had not yet hardened her, as it had her father. It had only steeled her spirit. She had seen much violence and bloodshed in her short life. One of her earliest memories was of lying at the bottom of a bouncing wagon, loading guns with nimble little childish fingers while her father clipped shots at a bunch of howling riders who pursued them.

Old Arco dragged out his well-worn guns. He had hardly enough strength left to cock them. "Yuh better go now, gal," he muttered gruffly. "I'll hold 'em off till—"

"You're talking to the wind, Dad!" interrupted the girl. "You know I won't leave you. They'll have to kill both of us!"

SHE stepped lightly to the edge again. Her rifle cracked twice. Its flat echoes went rattling through the peaked hills. A voice let out a bark of pain, and followed it up with a stream of profanity. Two or three six-guns crashed. Lead spattered viciously near the girl marksman.

Arco Drewett slowly dragged his body over the rough ground until he reached the side of his daughter. "Where are they?" he grunted.

"One behind that big rock over to the left," replied the girl, slipping fresh cartridges into the breech. "The other two are together, down below that dip. They'll split, of course, and shift around. Can't tell where they'll shoot from next."

Her father nodded. They were cool. Both possessed the same brand of courage, of calm fatalism. Old Arco had always faced life. He had never run away from it. The same principles were ingrained in his daughter, together with the smoldering fire of her part-Spanish mother. She would play out any game to its bitter end, and not flinch if she came out loser.

"Reckon they're some o' Japour's men," said Arco. "Jest the three of 'em, likely enough. Trailed us. Want to earn thet bounty money. If the whole posse was down thar, they'd rush us."

He looked at the girl. "Shore sorry I got yuh into this mess, gal," he growled huskily. "Seems like I've dragged yuh through consid'able trouble since yore maw died. Thought when I built up the Bridlebit Four, we was settled peaceful for life. Thet damned Japour! I ought've known better'n to have dealin's with him!"

"Not your fault, Dad," shrugged the girl. "Trouble has been fun—as long as we were together in it." Her clear blue eyes, when they went to the gnarled little old man, were soft and full of loving worship.

"Look out!" snapped Arco suddenly. "Saw somethin' move in thet ravine. They're workin' up it. Go easy with yore shots. Make 'em count. I've got four ca'tridges left. How many yuh got?"

"Two," said Lila.

A RUGGED line of hills. Tall pinnacles of rock pointing emaciated fingers up at the glittering sky. A few clumps of stunted mesquite spotting the sides of the rocky slants. Beyond the hills, a distant rattle of gunfire. It was intermittent, the spaces between filled with the rolling echoes.

The man on the big black horse listened to that gunfire, his eyes searching the craggy peaks. But he did not slacken the steady climbing of his mount. He was headed toward the north. His course was taking him nearer to that gun battle in the hills. It was not in his nature to turn aside from his trail. This was the shortest cut through the Tombstones. If trouble barred his path, that would be too bad—for somebody.

He was a giant of a man. There was something lithe and menacing about his huge figure, something raw and savage. It showed in his face—hard, hawklike, saturnine. Strength and ruthlessness marked its sharp outlines. The eyes were slate-gray, cold, sinister.

His garb, strange for that wild country, was somber and of clerical cut. A long black coat, austere and ministerial, reached to his knees. The upper part of his dark face was well shaded by the wide and sweeping brim of a black flat-crowned hat. It was the garb of a preacher—or of a devil in preacher's clothes.

The big black horse lifted itself and rider over the rim of a wide ledge, and turned sharply to the right. The ledge wound back and forth, getting higher and higher. The tempo of the gunfire quickened. It was louder. A voice, muted by the intervening masses of rock, shouted something. It sounded like a command, or a threat.

The rider went on, neither slackening nor hastening the pace of his wide-stepping black. That gunfight was none of his business. If he happened to get mixed into it, then it would become his business.

A turn in the rocky trail showed a gap between two towering cliffs. The somber-clad horseman frowned slightly. His cold gray eyes rested on two saddled horses that stood with pricked ears, blocking the trail. He rode up to them and looked beyond. His frown deepened.

The backs of two figures were toward him. They lay on the ledge behind a flat rock, facing the downslant of the other side. One was a girl. She held the butt of a rifle nestled against her cheek. The other was a man, small and partly bald, with a fringe of gray hair. He gripped a six-gun.

Neither was firing. The shots were coming from below. The splinters of rock, lashed-up sand, and droning whirs told of the close shooting. Those two were in a tough spot. And the silence of their guns told its own story. They were saving their gun feed.

The lone rider slipped from his saddle and walked forward, leaving his mount with lines trailing. His plain black riding boots made no sound. He seemed to glide forward with the silent ease of a tiger. When he was five yards behind the two prone figures, and crouching low to avoid the whistling lead, he halted.

"Looks like you're holed up pretty tight!" he drawled.

At sound of the deep voice, both heads jerked around. Two pairs of eyes stared into the hawklike face. The girl drew a sharp breath. Quick as a flash, she rolled over, swinging the barrel of her rifle around.

The man in black dived low. There was a smack as his hand caught the barrel and pushed it away. "Risky trick, that!" he observed calmly. "Liable to—Damn!" He swore softly as a bullet from below burned his ear. Whipping the rifle from the girl's hand, he snapped the butt to his shoulder.

The rifle spoke. A choking yell drifted up, the faint clatter of a fallen gun. The rifle cracked again, and the yell was silenced.

The old man beside the girl stared blankly at the huge newcomer. Recognition came into his squinting eyes. "Hell's gates!" he mumbled. "It's—Preacher Devlin!"

The man in black sent a swift glance into the faded blue eyes,

briefly scanned the lined face, and nodded. "Hello, old-timer," he drawled. "Drewett, aren't you? I remember. Borrowed a horse from you once, when I was in a hurry. Hit bad?"

Old Arco grinned with mirth. "More'n thet, Preacher," he said simply. "I'm kilt!" His eyes played over the hard countenance of the notorious gunhawk. "Yuh drifted along jest in time," he muttered. "They was makin' a rush. We only got coupla shells left."

PREACHER DEVLIN said nothing. He asked no questions. His hands slid under his black coat and out again in one smooth movement. Two heavy guns appeared in his fists. He poked their long barrels over the rock, and waited. He did not know the identity of those attackers. Did not care. Lawmen or lobos, it was an unimportant detail. They were making war on these two—one a girl, the other a man who had done him a favor. That was enough.

His right-hand gun spurted fire. Smoke drifted up from the gaping muzzle. A screaming wail sounded. Very deliberately, cold-blooded as a cobra, he fired again. Something flopped behind a big rock. He rose to his feet, his tall black form towering over the man and the girl.

"That's that!" he murmured pleasantly.

"And that was shooting!" breathed Lila. She gazed at the tall gunmaster with something like awe in her eyes. Her father had taught her that quick, steel-nerved action was a virtue above all others. She thrilled to the cool, decisive masterfulness of this hell-eyed gun-devil. Here was a man!

She had often heard the name of Preacher Devlin. It cropped up constantly in tales of trigger-brained trickery and ruthless violence. It was almost a legend. It stood for a man without feelings or conscience, a man who stalked his way with a sardonic contempt for the forces of law and order, wielding his own sinister brand of gun-spiked justice. And it usually was a finger dipped in gold that beckoned him into any game of life and death in which he chose to sit. Old Arco Drewett smiled, with a look of grim cunning in his faded eyes. All his life he'd had to use his brain, to make up for the lack of size. He was using his brain now. He was dying—but before he went under there was one more card to be played. It was a rag of a card. Its only value lay in a favor he had done years ago. But that card might save his daughter from becoming a penniless waif, hounded by her enemies.

"I want to talk, Devlin," he said hoarsely. "An' I want a promise from yuh."

Devlin looked down from reloading his gun. "I don't make blind promises," he said curtly.

"Not even to a dyin' man?" muttered old Arco.

"No!" grunted the gunmaster.

"I loaned yuh a hoss once, when yuh needed one bad, Devlin," hinted the other.

Preacher Devlin frowned. "Talk," he said gruffly.

Arco Drewett sighed with a touch of relief. That rag card might be worth something yet. "I had a ranch —the Bridlebit Four—jest west o' Ajax town," he began. He had to talk fast. He hadn't much time left.

"I lost cattle," he went on. "Rustlers. Needed ready cash to pay my hands an' to carry me through the winter. Borrowed from Japour, the Ajax banker. Gave him a note on my spread. Shoulda known better. Ev'ry man what borrors from Japour, loses in the end. After awhile I found out why."

He wasted a breath on a bitter curse, and continued.

"Japour's got a bunch o' saloon gunnies workin' for him under cover. He gits a note on a ranch, then sets out to see it ain't paid on time. Gits his

hoodlums to make trouble—rustlin', poisonin' cattle an' water holes, burnin' the range, an' so forth. Things that hamper an' ruin a man. Fin'ly he forecloses when the note falls due. Gits the prop'ty for 'bout a tenth what it's worth.

"I got hep. Found some've his bums runnin' off a bunch o' my cows. Shot it out with 'em. Killed two. The rest *vamosed,* took a tale to the sheriff 'bout me murderin' them two. Carried the bodies off my range, an' dumped 'em beside the trail. The sheriff—Phin Langhorne—he's Japour's man. Came out with his dep'ties. Lila an' me, we stood 'em off. Next day we had to high-tail when the sheriff came out with a posse o' Japour's men We been on the dodge ever since. An' it ain't only my ranch Japour's after. He's after Lila!"

CHAPTER II

Gun Guardian

PREACHER DEVLIN drew out a long black cigar, placed it unlighted between strong white teeth, and chewed on the end.

"Tough," he grunted. He had an idea what was coming, and didn't like it.

The dying man never relaxed his intent gaze on the face of the tall gunhawk. "When I die," he said slowly, "my daughter is gonna be alone. Japour's got men out, with orders to bring her in. Sheriff Langhorne'll close his eyes to whatever Japour does. Take her, Devlin—take her some place where she'll have a chance, where she'll be safe."

Devlin stared down the slope at nothing. "Takin' a lot for granted, ain't you, Drewett?" he growled dourly. "How d'you know I'm any better than Japour?"

"I've heard a lot o' things 'bout yuh, Devlin," said Arco huskily. "But I never heard o' yuh harmin' a woman. Anyway, I'm willin' to bank yuh'd look after Lila, an' treat her right."

The gunhawk sank his teeth deep into his cigar. "There's no place in my life for a girl," he snapped harshly. "Three or four days of the way I live would kill your daughter!"

"Not Lila," mumbled Arco. His voice was getting weak. "She's like me. Small, looks kinda soft-like—but tough as hell! She's had to be tough, to ride this damned life with me!"

The girl, herself, stepped forward, faced the notorious gunfighter. Her lovely young face was flushed, and her blue eyes blazed. "I don't need any protector!" she exclaimed defiantly. "I can look after myself. Ride on your way, Mister Preacher Devlin. I'll get along!"

The gunmaster glanced at the flushed young face. His hard mouth twitched in a wry, grudging grin. Spunky kid. Pity she wasn't a boy. Would have been simpler. He hesitated, shook his head.

"You're sentencin' her to hell, Devlin!" croaked old Arco, despair in his voice. "Yuh gonna see her go adrift?"

"No," growled Devlin.

"Yuh mean—yuh'll take care of her?" breathed Arco eagerly. "Yuh'll see nothin' happens to her?"

"Yes," rasped Devlin, and pitched his mangled cigar down the slope. "Yes—damn it! I'll look after her. Rest easy, old-timer."

"Yuh mean—yuh mean—" Arco Drewett fought for breath, while Lila went swiftly to her knees beside him and gently pillowed his head in her lap. "Yuh mean—die easy! Thanks a — heap — Devlin. Knew yuh'd—yuh'd—come—through—"

A long sigh left the small, thin body. A tranquil smile crept over the weather-beaten face of Arco. After awhile he closed his eyes. Arco Drewett still smiled, though he was dead. He had won that trick with his last rag of a card.

They buried him farther down the trail, and rolled rocks over the mound to keep off the buzzards. Lila cried

quietly. She made so show of her grief. Rather, she tried to hide it, as though ashamed of a weakness. In their long talks together, she and her father had many times agreed that death was a natural thing, often a kindly thing, not to be feared or grieved over.

They mounted and rode away from there, leading old Arco's riderless horse. Lila kept her eyes turned away from that empty saddle. She looked steadfastly ahead. Never look back—that was another lesson her father had taught her. The future always held hope. The past usually held pain.

Devlin led the way toward the north. The girl did not question his course, though it took them toward Ajax and into the path of the searching gun posse. After awhile the gunhawk asked: "That note Japour's holding on the Bridlebit Four—is it overdue yet?"

Lila shook her head. "No. It still has a few more days. Fifteen hundred dollars. The ranch, stock, and buildings are worth about eight thousand."

Devlin nodded absently. His chill eyes were on a cloud of dust that boiled up over the rim of the desert. "Here's that posse comin', I reckon," he said casually. "Sit tight."

SOON the posse was in full view. The man in front, wearing a sheriff's badge, was a stiff-looking individual with hooked nose and gimlet eyes. On each side rode a deputy. In the rear followed a dozen riders. A hard-bitten bunch. Most of them were double-gunned. Gun artists and plug-uglies, smugly riding under the guise of law-enforcers.

Their eyes grew eager as they sighted the girl. They pulled up, staring at the somber-garbed giant who rode beside her. Sheriff Langhorne frowned uneasily. There was something strangely familiar about that tall austere figure with the eyes of a devil. He pushed his horse forward, bolstered by the presence of his posse, and assumed his usual air of arrogant authority.

"Who the hell are yuh, stranger?" he rasped.

The big gunmaster stared at him, his probing eyes mocking and contemptuous, and grinned like a wolf. "Devlin," he said gently.

The sheriff gulped. The faces of his two deputies grew stonily rigid. The possemen sat very still in their saddles. A faint sigh sounded. Somebody started to mutter something, broke off in the middle of a word, and ended with a grunt. They knew that name.

"Want somethin'?" purred Devlin.

The sheriff started to shake his head, caught himself, and nodded. His eyes dropped from the frigid gaze to fasten on the hands of the notorious longrider. The men behind him were already staring that way, in the grip of tense expectancy.

Those hands lay quiet and still on the saddlehorn. Long-fingered hands, strong and supple. Man-breaking hands. They could move faster than the dart of a sand lizard. And the pair of heavy guns that lay concealed under that long coat were accurate.

"That gal," mumbled the sheriff thickly, with a jerk of his head. "Her an' her father—we're huntin' 'em. Law breakers. Father's a killer."

"That's a lie!" shot out Lila. "He—"

"Quiet!" commanded Devlin, without looking at her. The girl flushed and bit her lip. She recognized his authority over her. With that recognition went the unquestioning obedience she had always given her father.

"Arco Drewett is dead," said the gunhawk bluntly. "He's buried beside the trail, up in the hills. Three other men are dead, too. They're not buried. Up to you hombres to do that. They're your friends!"

SHERIFF LANGHORNE did not inquire who had killed those three men. He didn't want to know.

Not right now. The answer would mean a showdown. They had been his possemen. Backed by a dozen men though he was, he had no hankering to force issue with this deadly gunfighter. He hesitated, jerked his head again at the girl.

"She's—she's wanted, too," he muttered, wetting his lips. "Fired on me an' my deppities. We—er—we aim to take her in!"

Devlin's lips curved in a thin smile. It gave his flinty visage a sinister, predatory look. His arctic eyes drew up at the corners. It was as though he welcomed with baleful relish the prospect of a gunfight.

"I wouldn't advise it, sheriff!" he drawled softly. "But if you feel you must, why—go right ahead!"

The lawman swallowed hard. A muscle in his flat cheek quivered. He hadn't meant his remark in just that way. His idea had been to feel his way, and see if he could run a bluff. It made his stomach turn rather cold to have his words twisted into a direct challenge. He shook his shoulders, trying to manage an unconcerned shrug.

"Er—which way yuh headin'?" he asked lamely.

"I'll be right behind you all the way to Ajax," drawled Devlin kindly, and added, "Let's get started, huh?"

Sheriff Langhorne nodded jerkily. He wheeled his horse, glad to do it, and grunted a word to his barroom gunslicks. Very stiffly, very carefully, letting their hands show all the time, they wheeled with him and the party started back toward the north. Twenty yards behind, Devlin followed with the girl.

Lila Drewett felt a familiar thrill coursing through her. She had felt that thrill before, when her father had handled some tricky bit of danger with cool nerve and daring.

A FAIR-SIZED town, Ajax. A prosperous and hustling cow-town capital, with painted false-fronts and good wooden sidewalks. Had a fine big jailhouse, too, right on the main street, across the way from the only brick building in town—the bank. Japour's bank. His full name was in gilt lettering underneath the big sign. *Ajax Bank—Linus E. Japour, Pres.* Another sign on a side door announced that upstairs was the office of one *T. Cogburn, Justice of the Peace.*

Devlin took note of it all as he and Lila hitched their mounts outside the bank. Nice tight layout. The jail, sheriff's office, and the J. P. all together like one happy family—with the bank bossing the spread. There was a big saloon a few steps from the bank, too. Right handy as a comfortable hangout for Japour's hirelings. They could be reached in a hurry. The sign said: *The Welcome House—L. E. Japour, Proprietor.*

The sheriff and his posse dismounted across the street. They were slow about it, watching Devlin out of the corners of their eyes. A lot of people stood about on the street, staring and talking in whispers, wondering what was going to break. Lila Drewett was supposed to be on the dodge with her father. Yet here she was with this big, hard-looking stranger right in town.

When the word traveled around that the stranger was Preacher Devlin, all Ajax took notice. Men crowded to the doors and windows of the Welcome House, staring silently out into the street, their hands absently brushing worn gun butts. The presence of that notorious gunhawk was a challenge to any trigger-man with a hankering for a reputation.

Devlin strolled into the bank, Lila behind him. The two cashiers looked up, stared first at the girl, then at the man, and gaped. One of them flicked a quick glance at a small door beside his cage. Devlin caught the fleeting glance. He walked over to the door and kicked it open. It was marked: *Private, Keep Out.*

There was a small office beyond. A man sitting hunched over a desk sprang up and whirled around, scowling with annoyance. "Say!" he rapped angrily. "What the hell do you mean by coming in here like—" He halted. His eyes had fastened on the girl. The next instant he took a swift survey of the tall interloper.

Linus Japour was a reader of men. He knew when to threaten, when to persuade, when to cajole. He knew men. Right now he knew it would be wise to step lightly. An oily smile replaced the scowl. He altered his blustering tone to a polite murmur. "Ah—something I can do for you, Mister—ah—ah—"

"Ah—Devlin," drawled the gunhawk blandly.

Japour did not change expression, but he stood stockstill and blinked slowly for a few seconds, like a frog confronted by something inexplicable. "Yes," he breathed finally. "Yes, of course. Mister Devlin. I am Linus Japour—Linus Emanuel Japour. At—ah—your service, Mister Devlin. You have come to—shall we say—sell me something?" His eyes flicked back to the girl. His meaning was very clear.

"No," said Devlin. "I've come to buy something." He ran his cold eyes over the man before him.

A spider. That described Linus Japour, physically, mentally, morally. A spider or a frog. A fat tub of a body. Long skinny arms and legs. A round head set squarely down between high shoulders. No neck to speak of. A bulbous nose, black shoebutton eyes, and a tight little trap of a mouth. Pasty-faced. Couldn't keep his hands still. Forever dry-washing them.

He blinked again. It made him look stupid. But there was no stupidity in his beady eyes. They were full of craft. "To buy?" he echoed. "To buy what, Mister Devlin?"

"That note you're holdin' on the Bridlebit Four," said Devlin curtly.

Japour spread his hands. "Of course—of course," he breathed. "The note on the Bridlebit Four, eh? H'm. Two thousand dollars."

"Fifteen hundred," corrected Devlin.

Japour smiled apologetically. "Five hundred dollars interest, Mister Devlin," he explained suavely. "However, perhaps I don't want to sell that note. But I might trade it for—ah—something."

His eyes slid meaningly back to the girl. "Come, Mister Devlin—you are a man of the world. You and I know that everything has its price. I am not a man to—"

"Right—you're not a man!" grunted Devlin. "Now we got that settled, get out that note—pronto!"

CHAPTER III

Wolf Leash

JAPOUR'S eyes glittered. He lowered them. For a long moment he stood there, staring at the floor. Finally he shrugged, and turned to a filing case. Drawing out a folded sheet of blue paper, he tossed it onto his desk. "There it is," he said. "Two thousand dollars please, Mister Devlin."

Devlin pulled out a crumpled roll of bills, stripped off twenty, and picked up the note. Japour's greedy little eyes followed the roll as it was thrust carelessly back into an inside pocket of the long black coat. He picked up the money, counting it with swift fingers.

"I trust you will not live to—ah—regret this little piece of business, Mister Devlin," he hissed malevolently.

Devlin walked out with Lila. Japour followed them through the bank, his mincing little steps contrasting queerly with the long free strides of the man and the girl. He was a creature of walls and tight-locked doors. They were of the open country, of wide rangelands and broad deserts.

At the hitchrack a young fellow in worn and dusty range clothes straddled a little piebald pony, and stared at Devlin's big black thoroughbred. He seemed fascinated by the clean lines and sheer beauty of the animal. His battered sombrero was pushed far back on his head, showing an unruly mass of sandy hair. He was talking under his breath.

"Best-lookin' son-of-a-gun I've ever seen!" he murmured. "Say, you're a beaut! Never saw anything the beat of you. I'd give my right eye and an arm to have you! I sure would. Yep. I sure—"

Lila, mounting her roan, turned at the murmur. She had not caught the words. "Are you speaking to me?" she inquired.

The sandy-haired youngster blinked as though awakened from a deep reverie. His intent blue eyes widened as he noticed the girl for the first time. He blinked again, and expelled a long breath. "No-no, Miss," he stammered, staring openly at the lovely girl. "I—er—huh—" A quick, boyish grin spread over his tanned face. "That is, mebbe I was! I mean, what I was sayin' could've meant you, an'—an'—" He floundered helplessly.

Lila picked up her reins and did not deign to answer. When she backed her horse from the hitchrack, the young fellow had to nudge his mount out of her way. He nearly collided with Devlin.

The gunhawk caught the bridle. With an effortless thrust of his long arm he sent the little piebald rearing up on its hind legs, nearly upsetting its rider. "Look where you're goin', young feller!" he grunted casually, and stalked to his horse.

Linus Japour, watching from the door of his bank, saw the swift flush that mounted to the face of the piebald's rider. The youngster righted himself, staring hard at the broad

From its
OLD KENTUCKY HOME
it rose to be the nation's choice

LOOKING for extra-good straight whiskey at a low price, have you tried Crab Orchard lately?

It's straight as whiskey can be—ripe, ruddy bourbon from Old Kentucky with price down where you can afford it.

With fifteen months of slow aging in wood, it's now better than ever. Eight times more people are buying it now than last year.

You'll be smart to buy it too. In it you get not only age. You get the 93 proof *that means better whiskey!* You get natural brilliance and color. Before you taste it you see its quality in its sprightly full rich bead.

You will say there's little wonder that Crab Orchard has become a nation's choice. Get it at bars and stores everywhere, and accept no substitutes.

NATIONAL DISTILLERS

A GOOD GUIDE TO GOOD WHISKEY

© 1936, The A. M. S. Division of National Distillers Products Corporation, Louisville, Ky.

This advertisement is not intended to offer alcoholic beverages for sale or delivery in any state or community where the advertising, sale or use thereof is unlawful.

back of the somber-garbed gunmaster, a glint of hot anger in his eyes. The banker stroked his chin, and switched his glance to the girl.

When Devlin and Lila rode out of town, Japour still watched from the doorstep. When the couple had vanished, the banker crooked a skinny finger at the sandy-haired young rider.

"Young man," he called softly, with an ingratiating smile. "I'd like a word with you."

THE Bridlebit Four was a neat spread, and well located. Its ranch house, barns, and bunkhouse were in good repair. The place was deserted when Devlin and Lila Drewett rode into the yard. Devlin ran an eye over the spread.

"What happened to your hands?" he queried. "Drifted off?"

The girl nodded. "Yes—and stole a horse apiece," she answered. "I think Japour sent them word to get out of the country. I'm wondering about the stock. Japour's men might be rounding them up right now."

"We'll look into that tomorrow," said Devlin. "Later on I'll ride down San Pedro way and pick up two-three good men to help you run things."

The girl looked at him. "And then?" she asked. Her clear eyes clouded with premonition.

"Then I'll pull out," replied Devlin. "I'll leave you a thousand dollars to tide you over till—"

"No, you won't!" interrupted Lila.

Devlin's frost gray eyes flicked sharply to the girl. He frowned faintly. "What d'you mean?" he demanded. A harsh ring was in his deep voice.

"I mean," said the girl evenly, "that you can't buy your way out of your promise with cash, Preacher Devlin! You gave your word to my father that you would stand guard over me until I am safe. I won't be safe in this country—ever—while Japour is alive!"

The gunhawk's frown deepened. "You want me to kill him?" he inquired calmly.

"No," said the girl, a little breathlessly. "I want you to stay!"

Their glances met. Lila's eyes dropped, veiled by their long silken lashes, but not before Devlin had seen something that blazed in their liquid depths, something naked and unashamed. It left him staring before him into nothingness.

They dismounted in silence before the corral. Lila walked over to the house to get a meal ready, leaving Devlin to unsaddle the horses. The gunhawk stared after the slight, graceful form. His mouth was very grim, his face as hard as iron. But in his gray eyes was a queer expression. They had lost much of their cold hardness, all their mocking cynicism. For once they looked baffled, uneasy, almost afraid.

He stared at the saddle he was lifting off the roan, saw again those pleading blue eyes, and jerked his head as though to shake off something. His strong jaw tightened. He muttered a word under his breath, and flung the saddle to the ground. A saddle—that was what old Arco Drewett had cinched on him when he extracted that promise. A saddle for a girl to ride.

What other men—gunslingers, killers, lobos, crafty-brained renegades, bounty-hunting lawmen—had tried to do and failed, a dying little pint-sized jasper had accomplished.

There was an eagle in a *cantina* down in Chihuahua. A fierce-eyed old baldy—tamed. With broken wings and a silver chain on its leg. Preacher Devlin had pitied that humbled old warrior. Now he knew how it felt.

He barked a short, mirthless laugh —a laugh against himself. In doing what he could for the girl, and trying to carry out his fool promise in short order, he had forged tighter and heavier bonds for himself. He had un-

wittingly fascinated that bit of a girl with his high-handed methods.

She would hold that promise over his head as long as she could—as long as he lived—he knew that. Young, impressionable, romantic, lonely, she would use every trick of woman's heritage to hold him. Softly feminine, yes—and with the unconscious guile that would enable her to use her weakness to best advantage. Her weakness was her strength.

HE turned the horses into the corral, and strode slowly to the house. A fair head appeared for an instant at a window, and vanished again. A plate rattled faintly. She was cooking a meal for him, watching for his coming.

The master gunman barked again that short, mirthless laugh. And again he muttered something under his breath. It sounded like an oath. A promise—a saddle for a wild mustang—a chain for an eagle—damn!

It was a silent affair, that meal. Devlin ate slowly, his strong face impassive. It grew dark outside. Lila got up quietly and lighted a lamp. Its yellow glow played softly over her youthful face. She looked very lovely, very sweet and appealing. In her eyes as she glanced at the man was much of hurt pride—the puzzled, naive wonder of a beautiful girl who finds her weapons blunted against an iron wall of indifference.

Suddenly Devlin was on his feet, his head thrust forward, listening. He stepped noiselessly to the door and stared out into the night. Then he was leaping through the darkness, crossing the ranch yard. A faint creak of saddle leather sounded somewhere. A swift clatter of hoofs rang out. A black shape showed for a bare instant as it flitted between the barn and the wagon shed.

Devlin gained the corral. A top bar lay askew. He slipped past it, stared at the three horses in the enclosure. Old Arco's sorrel, the girl's roan—and a short-legged piebald pony. No sign of the big black.

Lila joined the black-garbed giant. "What's the matter?" she exclaimed. "Who was that?"

"That sandy-haired waddy!" grated Devlin. A terrible rage glittered in his slitted gray eyes. "The nervy young son—he's got my horse!"

The gunhawk snatched up a saddle and headed for the docile roan. The girl followed him. "You're going after him?" she said. It was hardly a question.

Devlin's eyes glinted briefly as he flung her a glance. "Certainly!" he snapped harshly.

"But—but you'll come back?" asked Lila, a catch in her voice.

The man made no answer as he cinched on the saddle.

"You'll come back?" asked Lila again tensely. "Remember your promise, Preacher Devlin!"

"I'll come back," came the gruff reply.

"Your word?" insisted the girl, a hint of frantic desperation in her voice. He was going away. She would lose him. There would be nothing left to cling to, nothing left to respect—no strong barrier between her and a world that seemed full of predatory evil.

"Yes," growled Devlin as he mounted the roan. "Yes—I'll be back. My word on it. Look after yourself while I'm gone. Keep good watch—an' a gun handy. Sorry to leave you, but—" He left the sentence hanging, and wheeled the roan.

THAT big black thoroughbred was a part of him. It had shared his life, carried him through many a tight place. Deep down under the hard shell of the notorious longrider lay the feeling of a man for his gallant horse. It amounted to brotherhood. The danger of losing that splendid animal swept all other feelings aside.

He rode out of the corral, leaning

low over the saddle, picked up the dimly seen trail, and heeled hard. He was grimly ready to wind-break this roan and twenty more like it, to catch up with his horse—and the nervy young waddy who rode it.

Behind him, Lila stood in the corral. Long after the tall black figure had vanished into the night, long after the fast pounding of the roan's hoofs had died away, she stood with her face turned to the spot where she had last seen him. Finally, with a sigh that was close to a sob, she walked back to the empty house. In her heart was a great futile rage against fate—and against that sandy-haired young stranger.

Devlin rode hard. When the roan flagged, he heeled it relentlessly. The trail he followed led toward the south. That young horsethief was taking no beaten path, but heading in a straight line for the border badlands. He would probably veer west when he reached the border, and strike up-country.

The first grayish tinge of dawn streaked the eastern sky when the roan gave out. Its gait became a shambling stumble, and its steaming sides heaved like bellows. Devlin pulled the winded beast to a drooping halt. He dragged off the saddle, shouldered it, and strode on afoot, leaving the roan to find its way back.

The sun was hours old when the gunhawk sighted smoke in the distance. He left the single trail, and strode toward it.

Half a dozen Mexicans, camped in a hollow with a string of stolen horses, looked up, startled, as a tall black figure came stalking down the slope. They rose silently to their feet, eyes narrowed, brown hands touching gun butts.

Devlin tossed a bill to the leader of the small marauding band, and strode on to the horses. He flung his saddle on the best one, mounted, and rode off. All without a word.

The Mex horsethieves stared after him. Ordinarily they would have made short work of any lone stranger who crossed their lawless path—especially a gringo with a roll of *dinero* in his pocket. But not this one. This somber ghost of a hell-eyed *diablo* looked like death itself. They were relieved when he departed. One or two crossed themselves furtively. He had been a man, of course, that black-garbed gringo, but—well, perhaps there was something to this talk of hell and devils.

Devlin picked up the trail again. It was a fairly good horse he had bought. A rawboned red gelding with a mean eye and a habit of bowing its neck as though it would like to buck. Had a jolting, awkward gait, but fast.

The trail still held due south, though the border had been crossed. Devlin frowned. That young fellow was taking a chance, pushing this deep into the badlands. No water, except the secret waterholes known only to the Yaquis, renegade raiders, and a few white men. And these chopped-up wastelands were infested with those same Yaquis and renegade gangs. That nervy young fool probably didn't know this particular corner of hell. Fools blunder. . . .

CHAPTER IV

Death's Discard

TOBY WAGGONER was lost. He finally confessed that fact to himself. This was a hell of a country. Worse than the Tonto. And the Tonto had been bad enough. He damned himself for taking this course. He'd thought to get through these badlands in a few hours.

His plan had been to reach San José, out northwest well under the border, cross back into the southern tip of California, and into Nevada. Then on up into Idaho. A long, circuitous trail. But good planning, he had thought. The border badlands would stop possible pursuit right at the start.

But the badlands were very near to stopping him. He'd never seen such a hell-hewn wilderness before. A crazy jumble of wind-blasted buttes, black lava rock hills, jagged rimrock, wide stretches of drifting sand. Alkali dust that choked a man, gagged his parched throat, and made him think constantly of cool water. His tongue felt shriveled.

And there wasn't any water. The idea of there being a single drop of water in all this arid hell's empire was just funny. There wasn't even any barrel cactus for a man to cut down and suck the pulp.

"Gettin' thirsty, boy?" queried Toby Waggoner, patting the dust-streaked neck of the big ebony horse.

The animal ducked its head, snorted, and rolled a suspicious eye backward at its rider. It could sense the growing uneasiness of this unfamiliar human.

Toby Waggoner pulled up and stared about him, shading his aching eyes from the glaring sun with the brim of his battered sombrero. It shaped up like sheer madness to go any farther. "I'll have to turn back, I reckon," he muttered. "Damn shame, when I got this far."

He patted again the neck of the horse with an affectionate hand. "But we sure don't want to take a chance on killin' you, old boy, eh? Be a dirty trick, that. Reckon it'd be too heavy to carry around on my conscience. Yep. We'll—"

His searching eyes caught a movement between two high buttes. Riders. High-peaked sombreros, cross-slung carbines, brassily glinting bandoleers. They were riding in single file, unhurriedly, lounging in their high-cantled saddles. *Bandidos.* A dozen of them. Right in his path.

They caught sight of the lone horseman at about the same time he saw them. For just an instant they stared. Then heels jabbed, carbines came unslung, and the band came galloping fast, spreading out as they rode for this unexpected but very welcome prey.

"Yep," grunted Toby Waggoner, swinging the black horse around in a slithering half-circle. "We'll turn back—right now! C'mon, old boy—show these spics what you can do!"

The black flattened out like a greyhound, covering the ground in great leaping strides, flying back over its trail. Its gait was smooth, powerful, effortless. It could keep up that swift, gently rocking gait for hours without tiring or losing wind. The gallant blood of a thousand strong-hearted ancestors flowed in its veins.

Toby Waggoner felt a thrill as the hot desert air rushed past him. What a horse! He leaned low over the saddle, chuckling with delight and talking lovingly into a velvety black ear. His had been a rather lonely life. Women usually embarrassed him, made him feel sort of self-conscious and ill at ease. But a fine horse could make him say things that were sheer poetry.

He looked back after awhile, and laughed out loud. His tanned young face was flushed with boyish triumph and pride in his great mount. The dozen *bandidos* were far in the rear, lashing their straining horses and voicing their chagrin in shrill oaths.

Two or three of them stood up stiff-legged in the stirrups of their racing mounts and clipped a few shots from their carbines. It was more of a gesture than anything else. The bullets fell far short, kicking up spurts of sand.

TOBY WAGGONER waved them a derisive farewell, and settled down to steady riding. It was a joy to ride such a horse as this. Fleet as the wind, yet the saddle rose and fell with the easy motion of a rocking chair. Well trained. Well gaited. He kicked one foot free of the stirrup and let it swing—a trick of his early boyhood, back on his uncle's ranch up in Idaho.

A few minutes later he hipped

around to look back again. The spic outlaws were nowhere to be seen. He had outdistanced them. He decided that it might be a good idea to cut west pretty soon. No sense in riding back too far over his trail. That Preacher Devlin gunshark might be after him.

The racing black came to a spot where three rocks spotted the trail. He swerved sharp to avoid the first, rounded the second, and swerved again around the third.

And Toby Waggoner, still looking back, left his careless seat in the saddle, did a full somersault, and landed hard on the ground. He wasn't accustomed to the quick moves of a horse trained to act upon its own initiative.

The black went racing on. It was a longrider's horse, trained to do queer things, accustomed to strange habits on the part of its rider. And that rider who had so abruptly left the saddle had not been its familiar master. Its master was somewhere back along this trail. It kept up the swift gait, empty stirrups slapping and lines flying loose.

Toby Waggoner picked himself up out of the sand, limped a few steps after the vanishing horse, and stopped. His wind had been knocked out of him by the tumble. When he got it back he stood and swore at himself.

A swell rider, he was! Doing kid tricks, riding in one stirrup. Not watching where he was going. "Did you," he asked himself with withering sarcasm, "expect the horse to tell you when it was goin' to make a quick turn? You poor damn fool! Now look at you—lost your horse, left afoot without a drop of water in this hell-blasted place, an'—"

He looked toward the south. A few tiny dots were bobbing up over the desert's rim. "Yeah," he said quietly, and his face lost some of its boyish look. "An' those spics are comin' hell-bent! Say good-by to a misspent life, Toby Waggoner—an' only yourself to blame!"

He limped to a rock, got down behind it, and pulled his gun. He looked back once. The black was just disappearing around a jumble of ragged buttes and black rimrock. He managed a wry grin. But for his fool carelessness he could have been in the saddle of that swift horse—instead of squatting here, waiting to gun it out with a dozen sharp-shooting lobos.

Good riders, those spics. He granted them that. They rode with reins in their teeth, carbines in their hands, guiding their galloping mounts by knee pressure. Indian trick, he had heard. He had heard, too, that these Mex border wolves could shoot pretty well from the saddle. That didn't make him feel any better.

"It looks kinda bad," he soliloquized, "for the heir to the Tumbling J. Yep—kinda bad! Mebbe I shoulda stayed home with Uncle Eb, 'stead o' driftin' off thataway. But this is one helluva time to think o' that!"

He grinned stiffly, well aware that he was talking aloud to keep up his nerve. His hands felt sort of cold. He had faced death before, but his chances had never been quite so slim as they were now.

THE renegades had seen that riderless horse. They howled with glee. They had been about to give up the hopeless chase. But this was really very funny—a jest. They roared. A gringo, escaping from them easily on the fleetest horse they had ever seen, tumbles from his saddle right into their laps! They would kill him, strip him of anything of value, then trail that marvelous horse. Easy pickings.

When the first of them was fifty yards away, Toby Waggoner opened fire with his six-gun, lining its barrel over his covering rock. A renegade gave a quick howl, clutched his shoulder, and slewed his horse from its headlong course. The trapped gringo fired again, ducked as a bullet sang

past his head, and shifted his position.

The *bandidos* drew rein and held a short parley. They all nodded. Four of them dismounted and came on afoot, crouching low and ready to belly down. The rest split, some to the left, the rest to the right. As they fanned out, converging on the rock, they kept up a steady fire.

Toby Waggoner had heard somewhere that the average Mex was a middling fair shot. He altered that opinion right now. They were damn good shots. Those whining slugs were outlining the rock with uncomfortable accuracy, just grazing the edges.

He drew a hissing breath as one seared his arm. A surge of quick rage and desperation shook him. He was going to die, that was certain. No sense in skulking behind this rock. Might as well stand up and shoot it out.

He bobbed up and chopped his gun three times. His first two shots found billets. The third went wild. It went wild because his eyes were suddenly a stinging agony. A carbine bullet, skimming the top of the rock, had struck a knobby lump and shattered it into a thousand tiny fragments. Those splinters of sharp rock sprayed full into his face.

The young gringo sank down behind his cover, pawing wildly at his streaming eyes. He couldn't see a thing. He heard an exultant yell, the padding of rushing feet. It was all over now. His body tensed for the impact of a bullet that would flick his life away.

Hoofbeats drummed behind him. The border rovers were yelling like fiends now. He stumbled around, raised his gun, and blindly triggered it. The hammer clicked on empty shells.

A RENEWED burst of gunfire crashed out. Voices were screaming imprecations. The hoofbeats came rapidly closer, then abruptly ceased. But the gunfire went on without a pause. The air was full of sound. Yells and shrill howls mingled with the clattering of spouting guns.

Toby Waggoner, trying hopelessly to fill his gun, his sightless eyes smarting like fury, jerked as a hard hand grasped his shoulder and thrust him aside. As he sprawled to his knees what sounded like a dozen guns roared in his ears with rapid staccato explosions. The yells increased, interspaced with wails of pain. The swift padding of feet sounded again.

Then all at once, it seemed, the din died away. Hoofbeats were drumming, growing fainter. A voice kept shrieking something over and over again. A single shot cracked out a punctuation to one more bloody chapter of the border badland's turbulent history. Then silence.

Toby Waggoner dabbed at his eyes, trying to wipe away the rock splinters from them. He was a little dazed by the unexpected turn of events. Someone was standing over him. He couldn't see that presence, but he could feel it, sense it. A vague premonition sent an involuntary shiver down his spine, made his neck hairs tingle, made him want to say something, anything. The silence became oppressive, ominous, laden with sinister meaning.

"Thanks—er—much 'b l i g e d ," he mumbled, wishing he could see.

"Don't mention it," drawled a cool, deep voice. "I don't aim to let those spics run their iron over my brand!"

Toby Waggoner knew that harsh, drawling voice. He had heard it just once, back in Ajax. He stopped wiping his eyes. Not much use in taking the trouble, now. "You're Devlin," he said quietly, and shrugged. "So that sheriff's posse didn't get you, after all! That banker feller was wrong, looks like."

"Japour?" inquired Devlin. "What's he got to do with it?"

Toby shrugged again "He told me you'd bitten off a lot more'n you could chew, this time, an' that you were cer-

tain sure to lose out. Said somebody else'd be riding that horse o' yours before next sunup, 'cause you were as good as dead! I figgered your horse'd find a better home with me than with any of the jaspers I saw around Ajax. So I—er—staked my claim!"

"Kinda premature!" murmured Devlin dryly. "Where're you from? You one o' Japour's men?"

Toby shook his head. "Nope," he denied. "I've been foolin' around down in the Tonto country. Got word my uncle died, leavin' me his ranch up in Idaho. Was on my way up there, an' just happened to be passin' through Ajax. That sure is a horse you've got, Devlin." The last sentence betrayed his love of fine horseflesh. Facing death, he could still think of that noble black.

There was silence for a moment. Then Devlin spoke again, a hard edge to his voice. "Japour used you for a tool. Knew I'd trail after any man who took my horse. You've caused a lot o' trouble, young feller. Know of any good reason why I shouldn't kill you?"

"No," said Toby, and drew a deep breath, getting to his feet. "Nary a reason, Devlin!"

"Then I reckon," growled the gunhawk, "it's up to me to think o' one! We'll ride while I think. C'mon." He grasped the other's arm, and led him away from the rock.

A short walk of a few yards, and Toby found himself climbing up into saddle of a horse. It was not the black, he could tell by the feel. He fumbled for the reins, and discovered that Devlin had them.

The gunhawk mounted his big black. He had met the animal along the trail behind the buttes, loping along with an empty saddle. He drew the red gelding alongside, and started off, urging both horses to a fast gait.

Things would likely be happening at the Bridlebit Four during his absence. A wily buzzard, Japour. Getting this young waddy to make off with the black had been clever—damned clever. And Japour would have other tricks up his sleeve, of course.

Devlin looked at his prisoner. His cold eyes scanned the young fellow with critical appraisal. A likely-looking kid. A bit wild and reckless, but time would iron that out—if he lived that long. Handsome in an easy, boyish way. Likable. Had plenty of nerve, too. Make a good candidate for . . .

A slow grin curved the firm lips of the notorious gunmaster. There was mischief in that grin. "I've just thought of that reason, hombre," he remarked amiably.

"Yeah?" said Toby interestedly. He had one eye cleared now, and was working on the other. "What is it?"

"I'll let you know later, mebbe," drawled Devlin.

CHAPTER V

Lobo Brand

THE Bridlebit Four looked peaceful and quiet. Too quiet. Devlin pulled up behind a low hill overlooking the ranch yard, and stared with searching eyes down at the layout. Toby Waggoner stared with him. The place had an air of desertion.

No smoke came from the chimney of the house. The barn doors gaped wide open, motionless on their leather hinge straps, showing emptiness inside. No horses in the corral. Not a sign of life anywhere.

Devlin remounted, motioning for Toby to do the same. But he did not ride straight down to the ranch. Instead, he coursed a wide half-circle, keeping close to the lowest levels of the uneven ground, careful to keep out of sight of the house. He came up behind the wagon shed.

Dismounting behind the shed, he strode silently to a window opening and looked inside. He gave a low grunt, and nodded. It was crowded with horses. A pile of saddles lay in one corner. Others hung on hooks

against the walls. Better than twenty horses in there. From the signs, they had been there for some time, hidden from the sight of any casual or unsuspecting visitor to the ranch.

"What the hell does that mean?" muttered Toby, peering over the shoulder of the gunhawk.

"Ambush!" Devlin said shortly. "Bunch o' Japour's gunnies around here somewhere—probably lyin' doggo in the house. Back out o' here, feller. Take it slow an' easy."

They backed away, keeping the wagon shed between them and the silent house. When they reached a dip in the ground they halted to mount their horses. Devlin led the way, without a word, in the direction of Ajax.

Half a mile from town, Devlin drew rein. Toby glanced at him, followed the direction of his quizzical gaze, and pulled to a halt. On a cottonwood beside the trail was pinned a sheet of paper. Both men scanned the crude pencilled scrawl.

Reward!

$5,000 will be paid by the Citizens' Committee of Ajax for the capture, dead or alive, of the outlaw known as

Preacher Devlin

Wanted for the murder of three possemen on the morning of the 15th inst.

Signed: Phineas Langhorne,
Sheriff.

"There's a right good chance for you to make some easy money, Waggoner!" observed Devlin, with a nod at the notice. "The Citizens' Committee, eh? That means Japour—the friendly hombre who wanted to put you in the way of gettin' yourself a good horse."

Toby winced. He was beginning to understand what a dupe he had been for the oily banker. And he realized the extent of the harm he had done. In Devlin's absence, Japour had grasped the opportunity afforded him. The banker had seized the Bridlebit Four and fortified it with his hirelings.

He had probably used his moneyed influence to bully and cajole the Ajax citizens into turning the town into an armed camp and declaring open war on Devlin. And Heaven alone knew what had become of the girl, Lila.

Toby Waggoner marveled that Devlin did not shoot him and have done with it. The gunhawk was out two thousand dollars, his plans were wrecked, he was outlawed with a price on his head, and Lila Drewett's fate was a matter for black speculation. And all because a horse-crazy young maverick had butted into the game.

Yet Preacher Devlin sat there in his saddle, chewing on a cigar, contemplating with almost humorous gaze that reward notice. Toby couldn't figure it out. He didn't try much. The lovely young face of a haughty, golden-haired girl kept intruding into his speculations. He found himself worrying about that girl.

"Say, Devlin," he blurted. "I'm sure sorry 'bout the way I've jammed things up for you. If I can do anything to help straighten things out—anything at all—"

"You can," said Devlin. "Just ride on down into Ajax, prowl around, an' see what you can find out. Circulate in the Welcome House, an' keep your ears open. I'll be waiting somewhere around here for you." His eyes hardened, grew cruel and baleful as those of a hawk. "Be sure you come back—an' come alone! *Sabe?*"

"Hell, Devlin, I ain't altogether a mangy skunk!" protested Toby, his face flushing. "I owe you my life, twice over. Not only that, but—"

"All right," said the gunfighter. "Get goin', young feller. Remember—keep your ears open—an' your mouth shut!"

Toby got going. He looked back after a minute. The trail was deserted behind him. But he had an uncomfortable feeling that cold gray eyes were

watching him from somewhere in the brush.

IT was mid-afternoon when Toby Waggoner rode back up the trail. He came to the place where he had parted from Devlin, drew rein, and lifted voice in a low halloo. No answer. He nudged his mount slowly on, peering about him. A soft hoofbeat in the rear made him jerk around. Preacher Devlin was riding along ten yards behind him, his hard face calm and impassive as ever.

"Well—find out anything?" asked the black-clad outlaw.

Toby gulped, and made a fair attempt at hiding his shock. He could imagine he glimpsed amusement in the eyes of the soft-stepping black.

"Yeah, plenty," he nodded grimly. "Lila Drewett is in Japour's bank, workin' as cashier. From what I picked up in the Welcome House, the sheriff an' a bunch of his men surprised her at the Bridlebit Four yesterday. She was arrested as an active accomplice to murder. Then the sheriff paroled her to Japour, after keepin' her locked up in the jail overnight. Damn skunks! Keepin' a girl like that in a—"

"Go on," snapped Devlin curtly. "What else?"

"I figger from what I heard that Japour's getting ready to rig another trick on Lila," Toby grated furiously. "A lot o' folks—decent folks—objected to her bein' put in jail. So he's pretending to be her friend. Gave her that cashier job as a blind. Figgers to frame somethin' else on her—plant some cash on her, mebbe, an' claim she stole it. Somethin' like that, I reckon."

Devlin nodded. The surmise was probably correct. It would be the sort of trick Japour would delight in.

"That would kinda make folks think she's sure enough bad," Toby went on. "You can figger how he'd use that hold on her. He aims to marry her. Tried to scare her into it when she was in the jail. Stood outside her cell window half the night, threatenin' her."

"How'd you find that out?" asked the gunman.

"I went into the bank—managed to talk with her alone for a minute 'fore Japour an' a coupla his gunnies chased me out," said Toby. "She told me all about it—after I sorta convinced her I wasn't the lowdown horse thief she seemed to think I was! She suspects Japour of getting ready to frame her, too. But she can't do anything about it. Can't step out o' the bank without a gunny at her heels."

He looked at the notorious gunmaster with a curious bitterness. "She seems to think that—that you'll save her somehow, Devlin," he said awkwardly. "She's dead sure you will, in fact! When I told her you'd sent me in, an' that you were only half a mile away, she—she—" He gestured helplessly. He could not describe the glowing light that had shone in the eyes of Lila Drewett at the knowledge.

He swallowed, and stared miserably at the ground. That girl—she worshiped this big, hard, bleak-eyed longrider. That hurt. It hurt bad, down deep where Toby Waggoner had never thought he could be hurt. It had started to hurt when he first began talking to Lila Drewett.

When he came out of the bank, just a minute later, it had been an agony. It was an agony now, whenever he remembered the light that had sprung into a pair of soft blue eyes at mention of Devlin's name. Toby was hit hard.

HE tried to look indifferent when he felt Devlin's probing eyes regarding him. Tried to look as though he considered the girl just another angle in a treachery-spiked game. The attempt was a failure. It didn't fool Devlin.

The eyes of the gun devil grew keen, calculating. He frowned a little. It was a frown of deep thought. He was

playing an intricate game, dealing with lives and destinies. His next step had to be carefully considered. It was not a matter of merely saving Lila Drewett from the grasp of Linus Japour. That was a comparatively simple question. A quick swoop down into Ajax, some fast and judicious trigger work, a swift getaway—and it would be solved.

But it would not solve the destiny of Lila Drewett. No, it went deeper than that. It was more involved. He had saved her once—and found himself saddled with the girl's blind devotion and hero-worship in return.

To save her again would cement that devotion, make it a permanent and unbreakable bond. A saddle for a mustang—a chain for an eagle—and eventual heartbreak for the girl. He was responsible for that girl's welfare. He had given his promise.

He looked again at Toby Waggoner. A good youngster. Had nerve, guts, and the readiness to take a chance. But it would take more than nerve to pluck Lila Drewett out of Ajax under the noses of her guards. That task needed an experienced gunshark — a steel - nerved fighting machine.

Finally a glint of dry and secret humor lighted Devlin's frigid eyes. He nodded. "I reckon," he murmured thoughtfully, "I'll take a *pasear* down into Ajax!"

Toby stared. "The town's all prodded up an' gun-ready," he said grimly. "They're waiting for you to do that. Most o' Japour's gunslicks are at the Bridlebit Four, waitin' for you to show up there. But Japour's got the Ajax folks all stirred up with that reward offer. They're ready to shoot on sight!"

"Well, you'll be with me," said Devlin blandly. "So mebbe I'll come out all right."

Toby grinned faintly. "Sure I'll be with you, Devlin," he responded promptly. "Gonna get Lila, eh?"

"Yeah," drawled the tall longrider, thoughtfully examining the chewed end of his cigar. "Something else, too. Japour has jumped the Bridlebit Four. That puts me out two thousand dollars. So we'll—er—cash a check at the Ajax Bank while we're there."

"I get it," muttered Toby. "You mean—stick up the bank?"

"Well," murmured Devlin, with a judicious lift of an eyebrow, "that sounds sort of illegal to me. Call it a — ah — compulsory restoration of property."

"Call it anything," said Toby, with a tight grin. "It still sounds like suicide to me! Or jail an' a hang-noose! When do we start?"

"Now," purred Devlin. That glint of secret humor still flickered in his gray eyes. "You look after the girl. I'll tend to the rest. We'll talk over the details as we ride in. Let's go!"

IT was a fairly quiet afternoon in Ajax. Few citizens were on the streets. The sun was too hot for comfort. The saloon hitchracks were crowded with horses. A lot of men were in town, drinking and loafing in the barrooms. Japour had rounded them all in with his juicy reward, but as the hours dragged by the first tension slackened. The general opinion was that Preacher Devlin would steer clear of the hostile town—if he didn't run into the ambush laid for him at the Bridlebit Four.

Half a dozen customers were in the bank. Four of them had made cash deposits, and were idling away the time with talk. One was drawing his pay roll. Another was arguing with Japour, pleading for an extension on his note. The chief cashier sat in his cage slowly counting out the pay roll. Lila Drewett, in her cage, was making an entry in a ledger.

Two shadows split the sunlight that poured through the open doorway. They showed for a bare instant. Then the door softly closed. A bolt slid home. Three guns ranged over the handful of men in the bank.

"Stick 'em up, hombres!" The command was marked in a harsh, menacing growl.

The customers gaped, and quickly shot their hands aloft. Japour opened his shoe-button eyes wide, goggling in stunned terror and dismay at the tall black apparition that stood half crouched just inside the closed door. Lila Drewett uttered a glad cry.

"Devlin—Preacher Devlin! I knew you'd come. Oh, I knew you'd come!"

Devlin did not even glance at the girl. His baleful eyes, glaring with the cold light of the killer, roved over the men he had covered. His lips were curled in a savage, wolfish grin. Beside him, contrasting with his black and bloodthirsty mood, Toby Waggoner looked comparatively peaceful.

"Back up an' face the wall, you jaspers!" snarled the gunhawk. *"Pronto*—or take a slug in the guts! This is a stick-up, *sabe?* Five thousand dollars for me, dead or alive, huh? I'll collect thet, myself—an' mebbe a few lives with it!"

Lila Drewett stared wonderingly at the big, somber outlaw as the customers quickly obeyed. She had never seen him look like this before. That strong, sharp-hewn face had the satanic malevolence of a kill-crazy lobo. The piercing eyes were terrible in their blood-lusting ruthlessness.

She felt a qualm of fear, of quaking dread. This was not the Preacher Devlin she worshiped, dreamed about, had put on a pedestal in her heart. This was a devil, a loot-hungry and vengeful man-killer, a bloody-handed marauder.

Toby stepped to the girl as she came out of her cashier's cage. "Be ready to cut and run, soon as Devlin gets through," he muttered. "Our horses are out back, in the alley. Mount my red, an' wait for me. We'll have to ride double."

"But Devlin's horse is the strongest," Lila protested. "It could—"

Devlin overheard her. "I'm not loadin' up with excess baggage when I make my getaway!" he snapped harshly. "You'll ride with Waggoner. That's what he's here for!"

CHAPTER VI

Destiny's Ramrod

LILA DREWETT looked as though she had been slapped in the face. She shook her head bewilderedly, a shocked expression in her eyes, and gazed helplessly at Toby Waggoner. He flushed and looked away.

"It—it's all right," he muttered with awkward kindness. "We'll make out fine on my horse. Devlin—he's feelin' sort of—of tough. Don't you mind."

Devlin stalked over to the trembling and white-faced Japour. "You—" He swore, staring down with murder in his eyes at the cringing banker. "Open up thet big safe!"

Japour hurriedly complied, his keys rattling in his shaking hands. A miser's misery contorted his pasty features as he watched the somber outlaw rifle the safe. He cringed again, shuddering with horror, when the bank robber finished his work of pillage and faced him.

Devlin swung up his right-hand gun. "Gonna crack your skull like an egg, Japour!" he grated, and gave a callous laugh at his victim's terror.

Toby Waggoner jumped forward. "Don't, Devlin!" he exclaimed. "Hell, man—that's murder! You start on a killing spree around here an' damned if I don't let loose a shot an' bring the whole town! I mean it, Devlin!"

The tall gunfighter stared for an instant with cold hate in his savage eyes at the younger man. Grudgingly, he lowered his gun. His air was that of a man reluctantly relinquishing a cherished bit of innocent fun. He shoved the banker reeling across a desk.

"I'll come back some day," he growled, "an' finish this job right—alone!" Without another glance at either Toby or Lila, he backed to the door and slid the bolt.

Toby kept his gun swinging over the inmates of the bank until the door opened. Then he backed with the girl to the street. "Quick—this way!" he bade her, and motioned to the mouth of the valley.

As the girl leaped up into the saddle of the red gelding, voices yelled a frantic alarm in the bank. Toby jumped up behind Lila, dug in his heels, and grabbed the reins. The horse lunged forward down the alley. Devlin mounted his big black and shot it forward.

They cut together into a straggling back street, dashed past a few gaping loungers, and swerved sharp around another corner. Behind them, shouts and yells went up as the alarm spread like wildfire. They could hear Japour's shrill voice screaming a stream of profanity.

"The Preacher! Holdup! Robbed the bank!" The wild cries carried the news all over town. Somebody was howling at the top of his lungs for the sheriff, forgetful of the fact that he and his deputies were out at the Bridlebit Four, waiting in vain to stage a murderous ambush.

The fugitives swept out of Ajax and headed toward the southwest. A rifle cracked from the outskirts of the town, and a bullet droned overhead. Mingled with the shouting voices sounded a furious clatter of flying hoofs. A moment later bunches of hard-riding horsemen began pouring fast out of Ajax in full pursuit.

DEVLIN looked back, saw that straggling horde of bounty-hunters, and clipped three fast shots at them. He held down the swinging lope of his black, matching its gait to that of the rawboned red. When he found Lila's eyes regarding him, he wiped the mocking and half-humorous grin from his face and replaced it with a forbidding scowl. His eyes became cold slits of devilish malignance.

"Prod thet crowbait along, Waggoner, if you aim to trail with me!" he spat out. "If the load's too much for the critter, then drop off an' give the gal a chance!"

Toby looked back and nodded. He was pushing the red as hard as it would go. His tanned face went a little taut, and he brushed a hand against the butt of his holstered gun. Lila caught his wrist. She twisted around to look pleadingly up into his eyes.

"No—don't do that!" she begged in an impulsive whisper. "Please—stay with me. If you stop, then so will I!" She could not have explained, even to herself, why she said that. But she meant every word of it. Her feelings and emotions were in a tangle. Disillusionment, grief for a fallen idol, and instinctive seeking for something to take that idol's place—all mingled within her.

Devlin did not hear that low whisper, but he glimpsed the eyes of the girl, and her swift action. A smile flitted across his hard mouth and vanished again. The girl was very young, very impressionable. The resiliency of youth would enable her to absorb without any real harm a certain amount of shock and disillusionment. She would outlive her blind worship of masterful action—the worship implanted in her by her father.

She was outliving it now. Youth was strong. But it had to grow, to have experience, before it learned to analyze its own emotions. The aching gap left in her heart by the death of her father she had instinctively tried to fill. A natural reaction. And she had confused respect and hero-worship with something deeper.

She had made a mistake. But she would not make the same mistake again. A handsome and likable youngster, Toby Waggoner. Youth to youth. Propinquity would do the rest.

Devlin sighed a little. All at once he looked a bit weary, a bit regretful. He stared at the trail ahead, but his

gray eyes were not focused upon it. He was looking far beyond, across stretches of years, instead of miles. Those years rolled backward, back to when life had been—different. Not the hard, cynical thing it was now. Back to when he had been—not what he was now.

Those were gay, high-hearted years, way back yonder. They were gone now. Gone and forgotten—almost. Lost under the layers of later years—troubled years. Lawless years. Owl-hoot years. Destiny had woven a strange pattern into those years, a pattern that had turned life into a sardonic jest.

The notorious longrider twitched his broad shoulders in an impatient shrug. Never look back. His eyes went to the young girl, to Toby Waggoner. He grinned faintly. Quite an act that, back there at the bank. This was one time he had beaten Destiny to the play. He had taken the destinies of these two, and shaped them to his own fashioning. He had a notion that he had made a pretty fair job of it.

Toby Waggoner turned to stare again at the streaming horde of pursuers in the rear. They were not gaining. But they were not losing ground, either. It seemed to him that the leaders were holding back. Probably none of them was any too anxious to get within range of Preacher Devlin's deadly guns. But they were hanging on—and they had fresh horses. None of those horses carried a double load, as this red did.

The red was hitting a fast pace. Toby wondered how long it could keep it up. Not for long, that was certain. Eventually it would break its gait, begin to flag. And then? He sent a glance at Devlin. Would that lone-wolf gunmaster stay and face with him that bounty-chasing horde, or would he ride on with his loot?

As though reading his thoughts, Devlin snapped an order. "Work over toward the west—to the hill country over there. If there's got to be gunplay, that'll be the best place for it."

They veered over toward the west. The maneuver cost them some lost ground. The pursuing horde guessed the intentions of the fugitives, tried to head them off. A small bunch of them got too close. Devlin's guns spat an ominous threat, and the bunch cautiously reined in and fell back to the main party.

Those singing bullets had come very close. One man pinched his ear to stop it bleeding. Another cocked an eye askance up at his hat brim. It had a ragged rip in it that he had never noticed before.

The low, far-spreading hills of the Tumacacoris loomed up closer. The fugitives thundered through a maze of sandstone buttes, their hoofbeats sending echoes ringing from pinnacle to pinnacle, like the rattle of deep-toned and muted drums in empty halls. They took the first slope at full gallop, went over it, and raced down into a shallow valley.

Turning with the course of the valley, they cut into a side draw, pounded along its sharp slant, and descended abruptly into a dry arroyo. They kept to the arroyo. Its dry bed was cluttered and slippery with time-polished white stones, but it was a natural road that led up into the higher levels of the hills. And there was small danger of any flanking party heading them off.

Devlin rode in the rear, constantly turning in the saddle to stare back. The sounds of pursuit were very plain. He was holding in his horse, letting the red set the pace. The powerful black, eager to flatten out and show its heels, kept shaking its glossy head with impatience at the restraining hand on the tight rein. It was not accustomed to being checked when hoofbeats thundered in the rear.

On a straight stretch of the arroyo, the first of the pursuing mob came

into sight as they rounded a bend in the bed. At the next curve Devlin reined to a halt behind a jutting shoulder of the overhanging bank and pulled out his saddle gun from its boot. Toby looked back, started to pull up, caught the gunhawk's curt nod, and went on.

Devlin waited, calmly chewing on the end of a frayed cigar, until the leaders of the oncoming riders were a scant fifty yards distant. Then he swung up his short-barreled rifle, stepped out from the sheltering bank and opened fire.

At that distance, with those gun-wise hands working the rifle, it was point-blank range. A horse went down with a short squeal, a bullet in its brain. Its rider hurtled in a double somersault and lay still when he landed.

Another rider let out a sharp yell and grabbed at his shoulder dropping his reins. His horse stumbled with the suddenly slackened lines, slithered frantically, and slewed half around with all four legs spread wide apart, partly blocking the arroyo.

The next moment it was the center of a kicking, scrambling mass of cursing men and squealing animals. The leaders of the Ajax mob, unable to check the speed of their mounts on the slippery stones, piled up in a tangle. In the midst of the unearthly din, Devlin, grim mischief in his cold eyes, planted shots where they would do the most good.

TOBY and the girl were toiling their mount up a steep incline of the arroyo bed when Devlin caught up with them. They had heard the shooting, the screams, howls and curses. They looked at him. He said nothing. His granite-hard face was a mask of impassivity.

Five minutes later Devlin dropped back again. When he caught up with Toby and Lila once more he curtly ordered a halt. They pulled up, staring at him. The girl looked dubious, wary. There was a cloud of something that was almost fear in her soft eyes.

She still respected this tall, hawk-faced gunmaster. But that respect was now spiced with dread. She had seen him once as a ruthless, callous, cold-blooded devil. She instinctively huddled closer to Toby.

"We'll never get clear this way," snapped Devlin. "They're still comin' hard after us. No stoppin' 'em. We've got to split. One of us stays here an' stands 'em off—the other rides on. *Sabe?*"

Toby nodded. "I'll stay," he said quietly.

Devlin shrugged. "All right," he said indifferently. "C'mon, Lila."

The girl shook her head, backing away from him. "I'm staying—with Toby!" she said breathlessly. Her eyes were very steady.

The gunmaster scowled. "So it's like that, eh?" he rapped. "Then I'll stay. He can go."

"And I go with him!" said Lila. She was frightened now. Her eyes showed it. She was openly defying the authority of this grim wolf of a man—this gun guardian. That took courage.

Devlin stared hard at her. His gray eyes narrowed to slits. "You mean that?" he barked harshly. "You choose him?"

The girl nodded, white-faced, but very determined. "Yes," she whispered. "I choose—Toby!"

"Then go!" spat the gunhawk. "Go—both o' you! G'wan, travel—'fore I change my mind. I'll stay here an' down a few more o' those hombres." He slapped a gun barrel smartly across the flank of the red, sending it cantering with its double load up the arroyo.

Toby slackened the pace of the bolting horse after it covered a hundred yards. He looked down at the fair head against his chest.

"Did—did you mean you—you really choose me, Lila?" he stammered. "I mean—I've got a mighty good ranch waitin' for me up in Idaho.

I'd—I'd admire for you to see that ranch. Mebbe you'd—you'd want to stay on there. Course, you got the Bridlebit Four to think about. It's rightfully yours. Somehow I got a hunch Japour ain't gonna be botherin' around it any more, an' I reckon it wouldn't be hard to find a buyer . . . But it ain't too late yet, if you're not sure. Still time to change your mind."

"I don't want to change my mind, Toby," whispered the girl.

She knew her own heart now. It had taken a shock, a revelation, to untangle her emotions and set them straight. She turned to look back at the lone figure of Devlin. Her eyes grew misty. She was saying good-by to an ideal. It was as though she were bidding farewell to that solitary grave up in the Tombstones again.

"WAVE him good-by, Lila," said Toby huskily. "He's sure a man. Some day I'll tell you just how big a man he is. Then you'll understand about—what happened today."

Lila waved a hand to that lone black form. She would never see him again, but he would always remain in her memory. Toby waved, too. Over the intervening distance the eyes of the two men met understandingly.

Devlin flipped a hand in casual farewell. *"Adios!"* he called gruffly.

When the red gelding vanished around a curve the gunhawk let his hand drop to his side. His broad shoulders slumped a little. Again that regretful, faraway look came into his eyes. There went youth, happiness, young dreams, lives in the making. There, but for the rulings of a sardonic destiny, went Preacher Devlin.

Again he shrugged impatiently. His hand touched a well-filled pocket of his black, ministerial coat. He felt a crisp wad inside. There were other crisp wads in other pockets. His old, hard grin came back—a grin that mocked at life, at destiny, at himself.

He led the black behind a bulging rock and loaded his saddle gun. He grinned again as he heard the clatter of oncoming hoofs, coming up the arroyo. Not many in that bunch. He had seen most of the bounty-hunters turn back, disgusted, the last time he had dropped to the rear. But there would not have been any point in telling Toby and Lila of that little detail.

He waited, leaning behind the rock. Seven riders came into view. Japour and a half a dozen of his hireling gunslingers. They rode cautiously, with furtive glances about them. The banker, though scared green, was drawn to continue the chase by the agonizing thought of his rifled safe—and Lila. He was probably hoping that something would happen to deal top cards into his hand.

Hidden behind his rock, Devlin studied that pasty face. Black little shoe-button eyes, tight mouth, flabby cheeks. A grasping spider of a man.

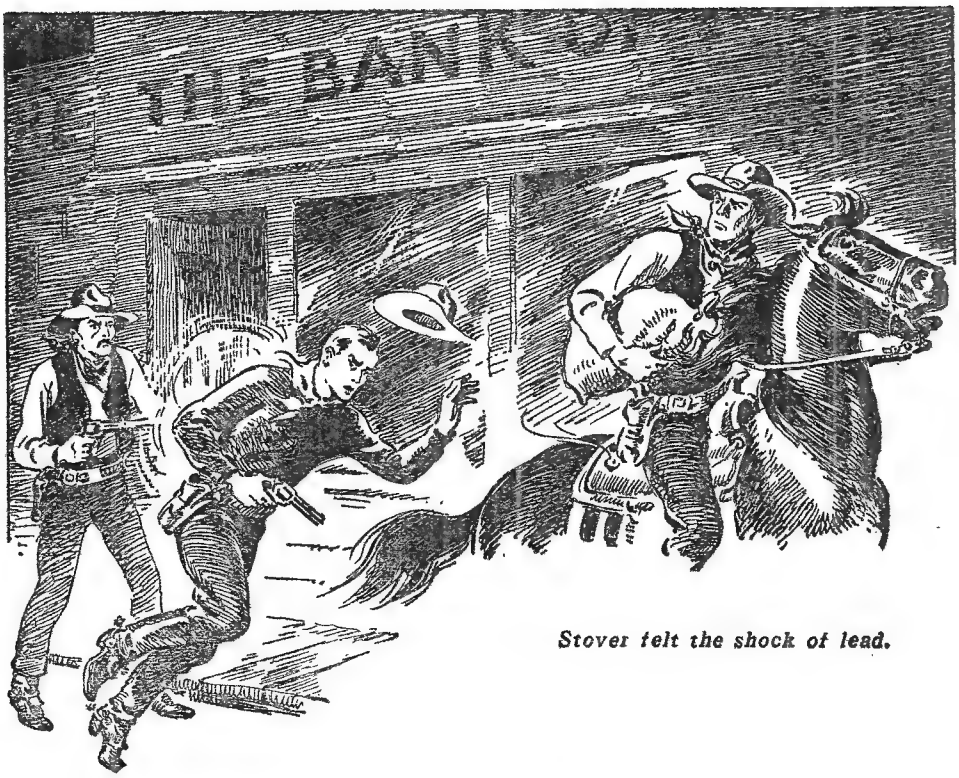
The waiting gunmaster bit clean through his cigar. His gray eyes went stonily blank. The world in general would be a better place for all concerned without creatures like this Japour.

He lined up the sights of his rifle, stepped out from behind the rock, and took careful aim.

Japour gave a throaty wail of terror at what he saw. His gunsters swung their mounts around, retreat their main thought. The banker, screaming like a scared woman, tried to dive back among them for shelter, eager to sacrifice anybody in favor of his own skin.

Devlin smiled. It was almost a benevolent smile.

He squeezed the trigger. Without a glance to see the result of his shot, he unhurriedly mounted his black, slipped the saddle gun back into its boot, and rode slowly away. He did not look toward the west, nor toward the rear, as he climbed his mount out of the arroyo and headed for the lost badlands in the south. Never looked back.



Stover felt the shock of lead.

Trigger Gamble

When Jim Stover joined Sevren's longriders, he was told to take orders. But Stover was better at giving them. And when he ordered Sevren to free Julie Miller, he was asking to match gun magic with death-sure trigger treachery.

By PETER GERMANE

Author of "Riders of Cougar Canyon," etc.

THE small trading post squatted unprotestingly under the rising storm. Tiny, gritty particles grated against the few warped structures that faced out to the eastern end of the rock-ribbed Vultures. The wind moaned eerily over the sagging buildings, warning of the fury of the desert storm that would soon lash them.

Four horses stamped restlessly before Kerrigan's Saloon and Store. Tails to the wind. One of them whinnied, but the protest was not heard inside the store.

Though it was midday, the interior of the trading post was lighted. It was strangely quiet and tense. The thin rasp of an angry voice, deadly and cold, drifted out to the sand-whipped street.

It was then that Jim Stover came riding a weary blue roan stallion up through the murk. A big, broad-shouldered man, with the sleepy

grace of a cat, and reckless gray eyes in a tanned, strong face. The low-tied guns at his lean hips, butts shiny and dented, gave indication he was no mere puncher. The restless vitality of red-blooded youth had kept him roaming. An urge to see what lay beyond the next hill range, across the next river, had led him over most of the cattle country.

He dismounted with careless ease, dropping the reins of his cayuse over the rail. He would see inside for a room and a place for his cayuse. And a drink. He had beat the storm across the desert, and he was dry.

A heavy door, a necessity in desert country, was closed. Jim Stover heard muffled voices as he gripped the latch, and the deadly rasp of one, deadly even in its muted quality, sent a slow fire through his muscles.

He swung the heavy door open. He stepped through, into a big room, a deceiving grin on his well-formed lips. And the smile did not change at what he felt in the saloon.

The gathering tension of death was in that room. It was plain in the slouched figures of the four men by the bar. In the strained, fear-filled faces of the motley group at the tables.

The men at those tables moved their heads to see Jim Stover. What they saw did not reassure them. There was something in the big, dusty stranger's walk, in the way his hands swung over his wooden-butted guns, that chilled.

The three craggy gents facing the lone man at the bar did not turn their heads. Only their eyes. Hard eyes, cold and expressionless, they fitted the guns that rode low at their hips. Wolves of the hills, those four—for the big, heavy-shouldered, square-faced man facing them, taut and sneering, was one of them.

The reputations of those four men in the tawny, rock-ribbed Nevada hills gave inhabitants of the off-trail towns cold chill. The motley group in Kerrigan's place knew them for Sevren longriders—Sevren, the hill wolf, with unbeatable guns, the outlaw who made mock of the law in the country bordering the Vultures.

That four of Sevren's longriders had elected to quarrel among themselves in Kerrigan's Saloon had been subject of much inner cursing by Kerrigan himself. The portly, red-faced owner, behind the counter that served as bar, was careful to keep that displeasure out of his face and eyes.

Of the three outlaws, one, a wolf-faced gent, was evidently the leader. He turned his gaze again to the lone man by the bar. A cold confidence was in his shallow eyes. No man, he felt sure, would obtrude when the Nevada wolves were settling a grudge. No man ever had.

His voice, coldly impatient, forced the play. "What you stallin' for, Jock?" It held a queer rasp that again jarred on Stover's nerves. The grin in the wandering puncher's eyes mingled with little flaring lights.

Jock was backed against the bar. His square face, weather-beaten and rough, made his age a matter of guess, but his movements, his slow slouch, proved him no novice in the gun game. He was looking into the face of death, and there was no fear in his bold black eyes. He had known Nels would get him, some day.

Three against one. Three of the fastest shooting killers in Sevren's wolf pack. Jock's thick lips curled, and the contempt was plain in his black eyes. "I'm waitin' to give you first break, Nels!" he sneered.

IT was Jim's voice, unhurriedly even, casual, that stiffened Nel's gun hand. Sent flaring, cold lights into his tawny eyes.

"Gents, three against one is an insult to the cattle country. If the game's open, I'm honin' to sit in on it. Two against three is more even." And he moved away from the wall, his eyes still smiling.

Jim Stover was like that. Reckless, careless, with his own code of right and wrong.

For a split moment that tense tableau held. Nels and his two partners stiff, eyes glinting with icy lights. Killers, poised to strike. Jock, head thrown back, nostrils flaring, hands hooked over his gun butts.

The moaning wind whipped sand through the partly open door. Sand that made queer grating sounds on the wood floor. A shutter banged loudly, like the beating wing of a dying hawk.

Then that scene disrupted to the blur of action. Men cursed as they dived for safety. And they peered with wide eyes at a gun fandango that would serve them for many stories after.

Jim Stover's double draw was unseen. Only streaks of pale smoke, stabbed through with reddish flares of death, seemed to appear abruptly at his hips. The crashing roar of Colts seemed to rock Kerrigan's Hall to its foundations.

Nels folded up, his wolf face twisted, his teeth showing in a last snarl of effort. His two companions were already on the floor. One of them tried to lift a heavy Colt as he wavered on his knees, and Jock's last slug slapped into his distorted face.

The quiet seemed heavy, pressing, after the shots had faded. Smoke drifted in slow-rising layers to the rafters ceiling.

Jim Stover stood on balanced feet, and the reckless quirk was still on his lips. Two guns were in his hands, and smoke curled up from twin muzzles. Slowly he holstered them, his eyes sliding from the dead men to Jock, swaying by the bar.

Blood was making a dark blot at Jock's left shoulder. His arm was limp. A Colt dangled in it. Slowly the Sevren outlaw looked from the sprawled figures to Jim.

He holstered his right-hand gun, took his left Colt out of his limp hand. Holstered it awkwardly. Then he turned, a little unsteadily, and pounded on the bar with his good right hand.

"Kerrigan!" His voice boomed.

The white-faced owner fairly jumped. He sidled up to face Jock across the counter. He slid a swift glance to the lithe stranger watching with curious eyes.

Jock roared: "A bottle of yore best rye—pronto!"

Kerrigan hurried to obey. He slid the bottle and a glass across the bar surface.

Jock didn't use the glass. He tipped the bottle to his mouth and when he lowered it, more than a corner had been taken out of it. He turned then, without another glance at the dead men.

"Have a drink, pardner?" he said to Jim.

Stover's grin grew. "Don't mind if I do," he said, and walked to the bar.

Jock handed him the bottle and watched him pour a drink into the glass. He took the bottle after Jim placed it down, and tipped it again.

He gave a snort of satisfaction, crinkled his weather-beaten face, and grunted: "Best medicine for slug holes in the country, bar none." He screwed his face into ridges around his black eyes, and squinted at Stover. Squinted at Stover's guns.

"Damn fast guns!" he rumbled. "Sevren'd like a man like you!" He passed a rough hand over his chin, squinted again, and said: "Like to come along?"

He slid a sneering glance along the bar to the group at the tables, and laughed raucously at the sudden shrinking among them. The name of Sevren had a potent effect in that section of Nevada.

Jim Stover slid the offer through his head, and made his decision like he had made others all his life. Carelessly. "Yeah," he said evenly. "I'll come along."

Jock grunted. He lurched around,

bottle gripped tightly in his fist. He walked somewhat stiffly to the door.

Jim Stover grinned. He slapped some silver on the counter, turned, and followed Jock out into the storm.

Men watched that open door. The heavy cursing of Jock's voice as he mounted, the stamp of hoofs drifted back to them. Then the pound became a muted staccato that faded altogether into the murk.

Kerrigan stared, long after the sounds of those cayuses had died. He had just seen a play that was to remain in his head till he died. A stranger, out of cussedness, had helped a killer against his own pack. And that stranger had, just as carelessly, joined *Sevren's* outlaw gun crew.

Kerrigan cursed. Then his face lit for a fleeting instant to the passing of an unholy joy. A man like Stover, with his magic gun draw, was dynamite, primed and fused, in any camp. If Sevren rubbed him the wrong way.

The storm outside grew, and the wind whipped sand through the open door. Kerrigan went around his bar and closed it.

THE Vultures looked down with tawny, bald faces at the desert at their feet. High up in those tumbles, two riders, leading three saddled, riderless horses stopped a moment to look back.

Jock tipped the whiskey bottle, and the last of the amber liquor vanished down his gullet. He wiped his lips with a dusty sleeve, and threw away the empty bottle. He followed Jim's gaze down the hill slope. The desert floor was hidden under the raging storm, and Kerrigan's Hall was lost in the murk. Above them, over the far rim of the hazy hills, the sun was a sinking ball of red.

"Nels, Leroy, an' Rudy," Jock growled. "They came to their last huntin', damn 'em!" He scowled a little, said: "Sevren'll be sore as hell over this—" He shrugged his shoulders, and cursed the sudden stab of pain in his left side.

Stover's eyes were lidded. His gaze ranged to the tumbled lifts ahead. The Vultures were a jumbled, canyon-slashed range with a bad reputation. The quick crawl of impulsive recklessness pulsed through him as he stared into those hazy hills.

"How come you an' those other Sevren gents were in that tradin' post?" he asked casually.

Jock passed a thick, calloused hand over his square face. His bold black eyes held for a moment on Stover's reckless face, and an innate ability of quick judgment reassured him.

"We ran a herd five hundred miles to the line," he rumbled heavily. "We split up after the deal, for safety. Sevren gave us orders where to meet. I trailed north, alone—an' Nels saw his chance to settle an old grudge. He trailed after me, with Leroy an' Rudy, figgerin' after he got me, he could pass it off to Sevren some lawman plugged me!"

He swiveled around in saddle, spat, growled. "Sevren knew about the grudge. I'll give him a straight story." He leaned forward, pointed with his right hand into the hills, and his black eyes darkened queerly. "It's there Sevren's waitin'." He shrugged. "We got a tough pull ahead, Jim. Let's get goin'."

Night, dark and silent, found them edging weary cayuses around a giant hill shoulder. The blazing stars rifted the purple blanket that was the sky. A crescent of moon peered hesitantly over a scarred mountain face.

A great rock wall loomed ahead of them, seemingly blocking further advance. But Jock rode confidently toward it, and close to its brooding shadow, Jim saw the narrow cut in the dark wall.

They rode through. A small fire, flickering uncertainly, threw shifting shadows over the small box canyon. The silence was heavy in the confined cut. It seemed to press against

Stover's eardrums. He saw no one near that fire, but in the heavier shadows Jim saw the glint of steel, and his lips tightened slowly. From somewhere in the black gorge, a horse whinnied.

Jock's heavy halloo cut through the night. "Sevren!"

SHAPES edged out of the dark. Lean, wiry shapes, with drawn guns. They paced to the fire, a half dozen hard-faced men with slitted, cruel eyes that held on Jock and Stover with frowning regard.

A motley assemblage, Sevren's gun crew—some bearded and stocky, others wiry, thin faced. But hill wolves all, and a harder group of longriders had never forked a saddle or thumbed a trigger.

Yet Sevren stood above them as a lion towers over a jackal. A great blond figure of a man, big chested, powerful shouldered. He came close to Jock and Stover, and Jim could see lights in his yellow eyes, see a hard, ruthless, red-bristled face. Long barreled and grim looking were the guns thonged low on Sevren's hips. And as the big outlaw shifted, Stover could see the ripple of muscles beneath Sevren's faded shirt, the bunch and crawl of them across his heavy shoulders.

Sevren's voice did not give the lie to his physical appearance. It was fast, hard, clipped, but it held that rasping quality of authority that always jarred on Jim Stover's nerves, sent the slow crawl of reckless fire through his muscles.

"Jock," Sevren snapped, and slid a frowning gaze to Stover. "Who in hell is this hombre? An' how come *yo're* leadin' the cayuses of Nels, Leroy, an' Rudy?"

Jock passed his gaze over the grim faces of his friends, and scowled at the drawn guns. "Nels saw his chance to even up an old score, Sevren," he said bluntly. "An' Leroy an' Rudy backed him up."

Jock swung his head to the silent Jim. "This gent joined up with me—an' his guns were too fast—"

Sevren was stiff, staring with hard eyes at Jock. At Jim. The swift ripple of hate crossed his face. Something he sensed in the silent, lithe rider was a challenge. An intangible warning that beat in his brain.

Jock's heavy voice went on, outlining in curse-sprinkled words what had happened at Kerrigan's Hall. "I figgered we could use a man with guns like his, Sevren—"

Sevren suddenly swore, the pent-up rage in him giving way. "Damn you an' Nels an' yore bullheadedness. I had a play all lined up. But it needed every man. An' now—" He swiveled his hard gaze up to Jim again, and it was suddenly glinting with suspicion.

His voice was deadly. "How do you know *who* this hombre is?" he snapped. "Mebbe a lawman—"

Jim Stover came off the weary roan. His voice cut through Jock's protest. "I can do my own talkin', Jock," he said evenly.

His gaze slid over the fan of hard-faced men by the flickering fire. Held a moment on one, a thin, tall man, with a hooked nose and a scar that tipped down into one eye. A man who had listened to Jock's every word, rigid; whose fists had clenched once, in a sudden spasm of hate. His eyes had a glassy, baleful look as they stared at Jim.

Stover's gaze slid carelessly over the drawn guns. "I'm no lawman," he said evenly. "I'm Jim Stover, from nowhere in particular. No ties, no kin, an' restless as hell. In this section I heard a lot about Sevren, about his gun riders—" He shrugged careless, wide shoulders. "When Jock mentioned comin' with him—I came. I came of my own choice, an' I'm ready to rustle cows, or help rob a bank. I can stand on my own. Always have, an' will!"

Tiny glitters played in Sevren's

yellow eyes. Then the big outlaw leader shrugged, nodded. "All right," he growled. "Yo're in Sevren's camp now." His gaze challenged with the icy glitter of a wolf. "Just two things. Hold up yore end—an' remember—*I give the orders!*"

That fiery mood leaped again through Stover—and faded. He lifted his shoulders. "Sure," he said evenly. He moved past Sevren. "Where's the grub an' coffee? My stomach's damn near warped round my backbone!"

The hard-faced gun crew relaxed. They holstered their guns at Sevren's curt command. A moment later the banter of comment passed around the fire. Jock had his arm bandaged with strips of a spare shirt.

Later, around the fire, Sevren outlined his play. A swift raid out of the hills, to the sleepy cowtown of Bedrock. Sevren had scouted the town, found out that the banker usually opened his small safe around sunset. Some new deal was reviving the town, and money was plentiful. A swift swoop, timed right, men at strategic points, shooting, keeping the street clear, and a fast haul could be gained.

The men nodded understandingly. The fire crackled, and the blazing stars looked down into that narrow cut. Perhaps they, too, sensed what Kerrigan had sensed as he watched Stover fade into the murk.

For the careless Jim, watching across the leaping tongues, saw the hidden glitter of enmity in Sevren's eyes, and a cold, unexplainable hate in the baleful gaze of the scarred, thin man he had heard called Gilly.

And his own reaction twisted slightly his reckless mouth. Only one man gave orders in an outfit like this—and Jim had never been one to take orders.

THE waning sun, next day, looked down on that craggy company that came riding out of the furnace hills. A grim, silent bunch bent on gun business.

Stover rode stirrup to stirrup with Jock. The bold-eyed man was staring at the broad back of Sevren, at the thinner form of Gilly, at head of the band. And something uneasy glinted in his black eyes.

Once the scar-faced Gilly turned and fixed a cold, fishy stare on Stover. The stab of that unexplainable hate reached between them, and when Gilly turned his head, Jim's face held a mocking, strange grin.

The sun was close to the rim of the encircling hills when they sighted the sprawling buildings of Bedrock. Sevren pulled up to give last-minute orders. Then, grim and silent, they loped into town.

The drive trails had spawned Bedrock, and the diverting of the great trail herds from the section had broken it. Its false-fronted buildings were the same as they had been ten years before, subtracting the damage from sun, wind, and rain.

But renewed hope lived in the town again. The range flanking Bedrock had always been fair, supporting a few small ranches. Water had been the curse of the ranchers, and now water promised to be plentiful. Henry Miller, banker, had finally shoved across a deal at the state capitol to divert the Big Wash River across the sink.

Miller, a tall, thin, stoop-shouldered man with faded blue eyes but firm chin and kind mouth, stared thoughtfully out into the dusty street. He was envisioning a resurrected section, a future Bedrock. Outside, the sleepy town was silent.

The measured pound of horses drifted into the little bank. But no warning came to the old banker. On the wall facing him, a clock banged out six muffled strokes. He rose then, scooped up papers from his desk, and walked to the small, open safe. He thought of his daughter, Julie. He could send Julie away to school now.

The sudden smashing boom of shots jerked him erect. Sent all thoughts whisking from his head. Stiffened his thin body. He stared through the windows of the small bank, uncomprehending, wondering, his eyes wide beneath white eyebrows. And when he realized, it was too late.

The door of the bank smashed open beneath the plunging bulk of a blond giant. Miller cursed, reaching swiftly down to close the safe. He didn't make it. The bank seemed to shudder beneath the roaring of twin guns in Sevren's hands. Miller stiffened as he bent. He kept going down, and even as he hit the floor his face was going gray with pain. His eyes were glazing.

The outlaw chief ran across the floor, a thin sneer on his red-bristled face. Outside, the gun volleys of his men kept the street clear. He stepped over the fallen banker and scooped the safe clean of cash and silver. Scooped them into a gunny sack.

He stalked back to the door, gunny sack over one brawny shoulder, and a long-barreled six-gun in a hamlike fist. Near the bank entrance Stover stood crouched, guns ready, eyes sweeping the street, but a frown was on his face, and there was rebellion in his heart. He was not cut out for this sort of stuff, shooting at innocent men, cutting down old men without a chance. And in his head a decision grew clear-cut and cold. And it was no snap decision. This would be his first and last ride with Sevren.

The big outlaw sprinted for the cayuses being held by Jock, and as he ran he yelled orders. Gilly, on the other side of the bank door, was pulling trigger at a squat frame building down the street. A faded sign over that building proclaimed it: DEPUTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE. Little spits of red flame showed at the law building's windows.

STOVER holstered his guns and followed Sevren in a sprint for the horses. Bedrock was waking from its stunned trance, and all along the street flares of red were opening up. Stover saw one Sevren longrider, already in saddle, suddenly fold up, slide off.

From up the street a fair-haired girl broke loose from detaining hands. She ran toward the bank. Even as Stover swung after Sevren he saw her—a slim, supple, girlish figure, a white, pained face. Heard the horror, the fear, in her voice.

"Dad—oh—dad!"

Then, from the running Gilly, slightly behind and to one side of Stover, a sliver of flame leaped out. Stover felt the shock of lead that seemed to explode the world. His balanced run broke, he lurched down, rolled, and it was reflex that twisted him toward an alley. Lead from irate townsmen hummed by him, sheared at his shirt. But he made the momentary safety of the alley.

Blood seeped into his eyes, and in those first minutes he ran without knowledge, instinctively. Behind him, as though far away, he heard the sudden scream of a girl, high pitched, trailing away, and through the sound came the crashing boom of heavy guns.

The pound of the outlaw bunch's hard-running cayuses rose and faded, and after came the sullen roar of an aroused town.

Nausea clawed at Stover as he ran, but the instinct of self-preservation kept him erect, running. Men would search that alley soon. Men with vengeance in their hearts and guns ready. He twisted over a high board fence, crossed a shadowy yard, and knew suddenly he could go no farther. A last desperate surge of will swung him toward the dark entrance of a squat structure, and the smell of hay assailed his nostrils. And then the blackness claimed him.

Awareness came slowly. He found himself face down, nose buried in a pile of hay. He turned over and spat wisps of hay from his mouth. His face

was blood-caked, his head throbbed savagely. As his exploring fingers touched a bullet cut, a hard grin came to his grim face. He rose cautiously, slipped out into a dark yard. The huge yellow stars of the summer night blinked down at him.

Bedrock was still humming with excitement. Stover slid like a prowling cougar through back yards. He reached the outskirts of town, hit a dry wash, and went west with the cut. Well away from Bedrock, he paused, slid a hard gaze over the ground.

He whistled, a sharp, shrill sound. Waited.

The blue roan came at the call. A gunwise animal, it had plunged away with the rest of the outlaw cavvy. But loyalty to its master had kept the roan near Bedrock.

Stover mounted. He sat saddle, and as he reloaded his guns he watched Bedrock, ten years a sleepy cowtown, jerked back to a semblance of its hard-bitten trail-drive days.

Stover swung the blue roan toward the shadowy bulks of the Vultures. In those hills was a man who had pulled a double-cross. Gilly had shot from behind—and shot to kill.

By Jim Stover's code that act called for an accounting. He would pay his debt.

Under the thin light of a tipped crescent, the wandering cowman rode west, and in the dim glow his reckless face was hard.

THE stars of midnight looked down into that hidden canyon in the Vultures. The fire flickered cheerily in the gloom. Threw shadows. The shadows of hard-faced men, the big-shouldered one of Sevren.

Jock was by that fire, something hard and suspicious in his bold black eyes.

Beyond the fire, in part shadows, Julie Miller watched with wide, fear-filled gaze. Her fair hair fell over her shapely shoulders.

Gilly shifted away from Sevren, who was putting the bank money back into the gunny sack. The scar-faced man was staring at the girl with fishy eyes.

Sevren's voice boomed over the fire, and no one heard the faint *clip-clop* of hoofs that stopped at the canyon mouth. And the thick shadows hid the prowling figure of Jim Stover.

"A little over twenty-five hundred dollars," Sevren rumbled. "I figured we'd get more—"

Jock shrugged. "We lost two good men for that. I seen Lanky get hit, but Jim—" The black-eyed man slid a hard gaze at Gilly. "There's somethin' off-color about what happened to Jim—"

Gilly turned to Jock, and his tall body went lax with deadliness. There was no effort made to conceal the hate that suddenly blazed in his eyes. "I told yuh before, Jock, a slug from that law buildin' got yore meddlin' sidekick—"

"Yo're a liar, Gilly!" a cold voice said from the shadows, and the hard-faced bunch went rigid. Sevren scowled into the shadows, and Gilly, a frozen pole of a man, clawed his gunhand over his Colt. Waited.

Jim Stover came on silent feet into the fire glow. His hard eyes swept the group. A muscle twitched on his face as he saw Julie Miller. A cold surprise came into his eyes, and passed.

He stepped up close to Jock, and his gaze seemed to stab at Gilly. His left hand went up to touch the deep cut above his forehead. "It was yore slug that got me, polecat!" he slapped. "I'm givin' you a break—more of a break than you gave me!"

A tense silence dropped over the fire. Sevren scowled. It was the code of the hills, this play. The accounting, according to the unwritten rules, was man to man. The hard-faced long-riders were silent. It was between Gilly and Stover, and in a play like that they would take no part.

The cold fear in Gilly broke beneath the lash of a raging hate. "Sure,

I plugged yuh," he sneered. "Yuh had the devil's luck with yuh, or I'd 'a' got yuh for keeps." He slid his baleful gaze to the square-faced Jock, and his voice rasped: "Damn you, I was out to get both of yuh. *Nels was my brother!*"

Even Sevren stood silent. Like the others, he had known of an attachment between Gilly and Nels, but he had not known of the real tie between them. The outlaw leader's gaze slid over Jim's set face, and his eyes narrowed. Gilly was a fast hand with a gun. Maybe the trouble-making stranger would go under in the fight.

Beyond the fire the white-faced girl stared at that silent scene. Stared at the wide-shouldered young man with the cut on his head and the hard smile on his reckless face.

Jim's even voice broke that quiet. "Well—you got yore chance. What you waitin' for, Gilly?"

Gilly moved then, like a striking rattler, his hand a hard thing to follow in the dim light. His clawlike fingers gripped around the butt of his gun, pulled it clear. But he never squeezed trigger. He stiffened, swaying a little, his face distorted. His cold eyes fixed with a horrible fascination on the smoke that drifted from Stover's gun, smoke that drifted up to hide a grimly smiling face. When he fell it was abruptly, like a bag suddenly emptied of wind.

THE echoes died in that confined cut. Stover remained balanced, ranging gray eyes over the outlaw bunch. They rested on Julie Miller, and a strange light sifted into them.

Sevren recovered first. He looked from Gilly's body to the lithe Jim. And when he talked he couldn't keep a savage hate from sounding in his voice.

"Put up that gun, Jim! It was an even break!"

He swung his gaze over the stony faces of the three bunched longriders at his left, over the expressionless face of Jock, near Stover. And his voice fairly crackled. "I'm makin' a new law, right now. There'll be no more settlin' of personal debts in *this* camp!" He swung his gaze again to Stover, and his eyes were slits of yellow as he saw Jim had not holstered his gun.

"Get that—no more gunplay!"

Jim Stover shrugged. The slow fire crawled through his veins at Sevren's tone. He looked beyond the flames to the frightened, watching Julie, and a decision grew iron-hard in his head. In that moment he saw himself for the fool he had been, the mess he had made of his life. And one thought formed cold in his head. He would make some amends before he passed out.

His voice was level. "I'm gettin' out, Sevren. I joined of my own choice, an' I'm goin'. But I'm takin' that girl with me."

Sevren's eyes suddenly held flaring lights. He took a step forward, and all the latent deadliness in him quivered his huge figure. "Girl, hell!" he snapped. "Stover—*I give the orders.* That girl stays. I'm takin' her with me—south!"

Stover's face twisted to a thin, reckless grin. His lithe body was relaxed, but the Colt in his hand was suddenly steady, menacing. "Yo're takin' her nowhere, Sevren. She's goin' home—with me!"

Silence held in the canyon, and the ancient stars looked down and blinked. A silence in which Sevren weighed things, sized up the balanced youngster, and got the gun feel, the hint of speed, of power, of laughing, reckless courage. His yellow eyes gleamed with raging lights. His shoulders moved and the muscles across them bunched and smoothed like snakes.

The girl stood staring, the haunting fear in her eyes replaced by a wild hope. A hope that began to die as she realized the odds against this reckless youngster.

The three silent longriders moved slowly to Sevren's side, and thereby indicated their stand in the play that was breaking. Cold-eyed and stony-faced, they watched the gun in Stover's hand.

Jock, gripped between two choices, made his decision. He moved closer to Jim, and his thick fingers rode low over his gun butt. His bold eyes held a sneer as he stared into the grim faces of his erstwhile friends.

Stover's voice cut the heavy silence. "I'm takin' her, Sevren," he said evenly. "An' the first man to make a move gets what Gilly got—"

SEVREN did not move. His shoulders were hunched, his yellow eyes pools of baffled rage and hate.

Stover slowly backed toward the girl. The air was charged with a sudden deadly tension, and in the silence the flame crackle sounded loud.

One small movement of taut nerves, and hell would rock the canyon cut. Four against two, and *Sevren,* the dread hill outlaw, was one of the four.

It couldn't last. One man, running Sevren up a tree, in his own camp! The gathering rage in the big outlaw spilled over, and he moved, in a lunging side draw that was legendary in the hills. And as he drew and shot, he spun into the shadows that crowded in on the fire glow.

Stover pulled trigger, and cursed the shadowy form that lurched in front of Sevren, and took Stover's lead, instead. When he pulled trigger again Sevren was a dim bulk sliding into the shadows, and he knew he missed.

He was moving as he pulled trigger. Lead sheared the top of his shoulder, a swift sear of pain. Slugs made angry buzzes by his face.

As he spun for the frightened girl, he saw Jock jerk to the shock of lead. But the square-faced man who had thrown in with him kept his feet, and the gun in his fist spat defiance toward the shadows beyond the fire.

Stover reached Julie in the gloom. The girl was rigid. She shrank back suddenly at his looming figure. But Stover's powerful right arm encircled her waist. The surge of wide shoulders lifted her clear, and he ran with her. Ran one hundred yards toward the pitch darkness of the canyon mouth, where he had left the blue roan stallion.

The heavy dark hid them from the searching lead. He swung her down, whirled as a shadowy figure stumbled close. Jock's voice stopped his trigger finger.

"Jim—" Jock's voice broke, and something seemed to choke him. Then it came again. "Go on—Jim! I'll hold Sevren back!"

Stover gripped Jock, in the dark, and felt something warm and sticky beneath his fingers. "Hell!" he cursed swiftly. "I can't let you stay—"

Jock shoved Stover away. "Get goin'," he gasped. "I'm done for. But I'm rememberin' what you done for me, in Kerrigan's—an' I want to pay my debt."

Jim Stover gripped Jock's rough hand. Gripped it hard. Then he whirled, sprinted fast to Julie, gripped her soft hand. "Come!" he said, in a harsh, swift voice.

The big roan snorted as they mounted. It lunged away, carrying double, from the canyon. Behind them echoes woke again to the crashing of guns, and in the cut a hard-hit man paid a gunsmoke debt with his life.

THE morning sun, pushing over the flat range to the east of the Vultures, looked down on a blowing cayuse. Looked down on Jim Stover, dismounting stiffly from the saddle. Jim's brown face held lines of fatigue, his eyes a strange shadow.

Julie Miller sagged in the saddle, a small, tired figure. She stared at Stover, and there was understanding in her eyes. She had come to know the iron-framed, dauntless man who had ridden with Sevren.

Stover looked back at the lifts of the Vultures. And a slow frown wedged into his eyes. A hunch that Sevren had come through the canyon cut, over Jock's dead body, was strong in him. Sevren had followed them through the night—the hunch was almost a certainty in Stover.

He looked up at the wan face of the girl. Then he pointed down the side of the tawny hill slope. The edges of the sunlight were glinting on the huddled buildings of Bedrock. Close to town a group of riders, a posse that had hunted futilely through the night, was a small blob, edging into Bedrock.

"Bedrock, Julie!" he said slowly. "I reckon my cayuse can take you the rest of the way!"

He saw the pain in her eyes, and his strong face set. This plucky girl could never forget her father, never forget that he, Stover, had been with the hill wolves that had gunned him down.

Julie's eyes searched his face. "Jim—" she said softly. "You'll be on foot—and somewhere—Sevren—" Her voice shook. "Jim—I can't let you go—"

He came close to her, and his will gripped hard as the blood pounded inside him. He held out his hand. "This is good-by, Julie. I was a fool, Julie—all my life now, I know—I was a fool. But ridin' with Sevren, that was the first time I ever stepped outside the law—" His face held a sudden harsh regret. "I tried to pay for that—gettin' you back to Bedrock safe—"

Julie's pained eyes held something else at that moment, a revelation Stover had never seen in the eyes of any woman. "No—Jim—" she cried out. And then her voice changed, held a sudden, sharp note of terror. "*Jim—*"

Stover didn't see the lance of pale flame that showed at a corner of tumbled rocks on the slope. He twisted with Julie's scream, and the slug hit his belt buckle, glanced off, raked a surface wound across his side. But the shock of the Winchester slug knocked the breath from Stover, and as he crumpled up he knew that Sevren had somehow circled, reached the trail that led to Bedrock, and waited for their coming.

He lay on the brown ground, unmoving, getting his breath. And Julie saved his life. Sevren was running from the rock, leveling the rifle again, when the girl screamed. The blue roan reared and pivoted under the dig of her heels. Sevren jerked the rifle muzzle away from the man he believed already dead, and reached the girl as the roan was plunging away. His powerful arm swept her from the saddle as though she were a doll.

He swung around with her, looked down at the sprawled Stover. "I said she was comin' with me, damn you—comin' with me, south!" His words were harsh, sneering.

HE held the struggling girl easily in the curve of one iron arm, and the rifle in his right hand was lowered. He kicked out at Jim's motionless figure.

Jim came to life with a suddenness that brought curses to Sevren's mouth. Sevren swung his rifle, but hard fingers closed around the barrel, and the sudden wrench twisted it free.

The big outlaw swore wildly. He spun Julie away, lunged viciously, and grappled with the slit-eyed Stover. Together they went down again, and Sevren, confident of his muscular powers, sneered as his fingers groped for Jim's throat.

Julie groped erect, and blood trickled from a corner of her mouth. She sagged against a boulder, and stared at that rolling, tumbling fight; at two brawny men, who gave no quarter and asked none. Primitive men in that moment, fighting to the death for a woman.

The lunge and smash of Sevren's brawny shoulders was equaled by Stover, and the powerful bunching of the big outlaw's muscles held no more strength than the smoother steel

bands that rippled beneath Stover's tanned skin.

Jim lashed out with iron fists, fighting to get clear, to win a moment's respite in which he could go for the guns at his hips. Sevren, sensing that danger, fought for a grip that would end the fight.

Stover's smashes made a gory wreck of the big outlaw's face. His own features were blood-smeared and sweaty, and he seemed to see Sevren through a mist. He pounded away at a target he couldn't miss.

And it was Sevren who weakened first. Sevren who finally broke away, lunged with flashing hands for his guns.

The reports from Stover's right Colt seemed to mingle with the famed outlaw's guns. Sevren swayed, like a mighty oak bowing before a storm. His bared, broad chest held three holes, out of which oozed blood. He crumpled up slowly.

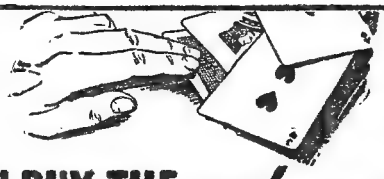
The world was a shifting haze to Stover. The bite of lead in his side seemed to come at intervals, like measured shocks. He saw Julie run toward him, saw riders looming up beyond the rocks, and he tried to turn, to stagger away.

But Julie caught up to him, and when his senses cleared again he found himself in the shade of a tawny rock. His head was pillowed in Julie's lap, and her cool hands were wiping his brow.

"You can't," she was saying defiantly to an encircling group of men. "After all he did—" She bent down to him as she saw his gray eyes open. "Dad won't die, Jim—" she said softly. "You hear—he won't die. And the posse found the bank money on Sevren's horse, in a hollow beyond the rocks."

She turned again to the men who shuffled uneasily. "George," she addressed a kind-faced, oldish man with a star on his vest. "You're not taking him—"

George smiled at what he saw in Julie Miller's eyes. "No, Julie," he said slowly. "I reckon we'll let you take charge of him—for life!"



The Cards are stacked against you

WHEN YOU BUY THE *unknown*

● You gamble when you buy unknown razor blades! Probak Jr. —priced at 4 for only 10c is produced by the world's largest maker of razor blades. It glides gently over tender faces, shaves tough whiskers without pull or [illegible]. Buy a package and see!

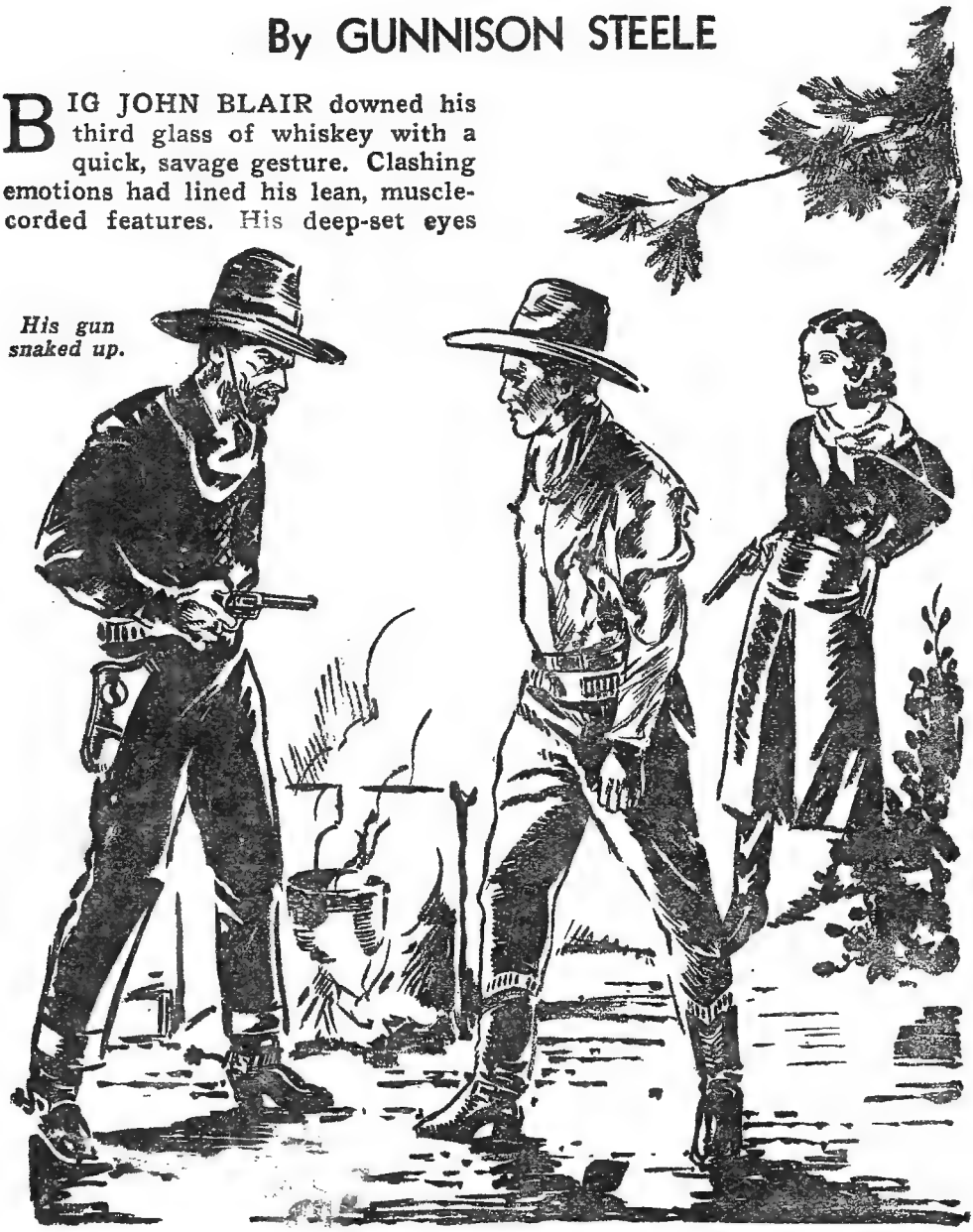
PROBAK JUNIOR

Blood of a Lawman

Big John Blair's love for the Yuma Rose turned him against the law he had sworn to enforce. He fled to the owl-hoot with the girl and her gallows-wanted father. But Big John Blair could not escape the lawman's legacy that flung him against a greed-mad killer with an empty gun.

By GUNNISON STEELE

BIG JOHN BLAIR downed his third glass of whiskey with a quick, savage gesture. Clashing emotions had lined his lean, muscle-corded features. His deep-set eyes



His gun snaked up.

were hard with distaste for the thing he meant to do this night.

He sat alone at a table in the shadows at one end of the big room, eyes riveted on a raised platform near a back doorway. On the platform was a girl, and she was singing. The haunting music in her velvet voice drove some of the ugliness from the eyes and minds of the untamed men who listened.

The girl was more than pretty. Her lithe beauty was a thing alive, soft and alluring, yet vibrant and strong and magnetic, like a lance of silvery flame. Rays from the kerosene lamps struck coppery sparks from her hair as her slim body swayed with her song. Her lips, red as ripe cherries, were smiling. But there was something restless and sad in the deep brown wells of her eyes.

Big John Blair sat with powerful body hunched over the table, watching her, and some of the grimness left his heart. The Yuma Rose, the harsh, rough men of boom-town Chillwater had named her in all respect. But her name was Mona Slade, untamed daughter of old "Yuma Jack" Slade, one-time gambler, one-time road agent, who had spent ten years in the penitentiary and had come out two years ago, a broken and bitter old man.

Prison had robbed Yuma Jack's brain and fingers of their dexterity with a poker deck. He was too old and sick to work.

So his pretty daughter, Mona, came here each night to Chillwater's wildest and gayest honkatonk and sang her soft, haunting songs, to earn money to keep them alive. And no man knew the thoughts that lay behind the cold, bitter eyes of Yuma Jack as he brooded in his shack a mile up the gulch from Chillwater.

Big John Blair never missed hearing the Yuma Rose sing, never missed riding with her to the shack up the gulch after her night's work was done. Big John had never loved another woman, never would. His love for her was stronger than life or death. Else he would never have considered doing the thing he meant to do tonight.

"Lonely, *señor*?" a soft voice asked.

Big John turned. A girl had dropped into the empty chair beside him, her dark eyes and red lips smiling a warm invitation, a pretty girl with a red rose in her hair.

Big John shook his tawny head.

The smile left the girl's red lips. "Bah! Eet ees in your eyes, like all thees loco hombres, when she seeng, thees too-good hussy—"

Something in Big John's bitter eyes stopped her words. She glided away. Big John's gaze flicked back to the platform. He poured another glass brimful with whiskey, downed it with that quick gesture. His head was still clear, for Big John Blair was stronger than the whiskey he drank.

The Yuma Rose's velvet voice died to a whisper. A roar of applause rolled over the big room as she vanished through the back doorway. Then, as the spell lifted, men moved toward the bar. The youth at the battered piano struck up a ribald tune. Other hard-faced men clasped loud-mouthed, painted honkatonk girls in rough arms and swirled about the room.

Big John got to his feet, shouldered his way through the strutting men to the street. He circled the building into an alley that ran along one side, to where a ribbon of dirty light seeped from a side doorway.

Big John paused, a quick flare of anger in his eyes.

MONA SLADE stood in the ribbon of light, slim, blue-clad body rigid with anger. A squat, powerful hombre stood at her side, one wrist pinioned in his stub-fingered paw, his whiskey-reddened eyes roving deliberately over her [illegible] body.

"Uppity, huh, [illegible]" the squat hombre sneered. "Hell, you ain't no better'n

the other girls, or yuh wouldn't be here!"

"You filthy beast!"

Mona Slade's voice was low, the smack of her hand sharp as it cut across the man's coarse face. The big hombre cursed, then laughed, a harsh, snarling sound. His hairy arms reached out, closed about her slim young body.

A low growl ripped from Big John's lips. Scarlet streaks zoomed before his eyes as a torrent of rage flowed through his heart. He stalked forward, gripped the squat hombre's shoulder, spun him with a single savage movement. Propelled by the killing anger that held him, his big fist lashed out, chopping the man down as if an ax had hit him, hurling him across the alley into the deeper shadows where he lay cold and insensible.

"Damned dog!" Big John spat. "I oughta kill 'im!"

"No!" said the girl. "Let's — let's get out of here."

The narrow street, rutted by great freight wagons, teeming with swaggering, gunbelted men who followed the yellow lure of gold, was dark with the gloom of the Dragoon Hills that piled up behind Chillwater. Chillwater, a roaring young giant, drunk on blood and gold and rotgut whiskey.

They mounted two horses waiting at a hitch-rack, rode slowly up the gulch that cradled the town.

Chillwater's tumult died behind them. The shallow gulch was quiet. A white moon rolled above the horizon, silvering the pine-clad hills above them. But Big John didn't see the beauty of the night. He rode without speaking for a while, a frown worrying his rugged features.

"Something's worrying you," said Mona Slade finally.

"Yes," he admitted. "Something bad. Mona, I don't want to do it, but I've got to tell you something."

Her brown eyes were wide in the moonlight, and Big John thought he saw fear in them. She asked: "What is it?"

"I've got no right to say what I aim to say. I'm a deputy sheriff, under old Boone Kerry. When I took the oath, I swore to uphold the law always. Boone Kerry trusts me."

Her voice was very quiet. "Go on, Big John, tell me."

"Two weeks ago the stage was held up out in Bear Canyon by five masked hombres, and robbed of four hundred pounds of bar gold that was goin' out to Denver. The driver and a shotgun guard were killed in the robbery. But you know all that. It's the rest that hurts. We've been workin' night and day, tryin' to find out who them five masked hombres were. And we've found out."

They paused now, as they always did, at a little spring in the gulch a hundred yards below Yuma Jack's cabin, and dismounted. They could see an orange glow of light in a window of the shack over there under the walls, where the old gambler waited.

Mona Slade's beautiful face was sober in the moonlight as she waited for Big John Blair to continue, and the misery deepened in the Chillwater deputy's heart. Nothing but his worship of the slim girl before him could have made him cast aside the duty that was the backbone of his iron code.

"Four of those holdup men," said Big John gently, "were 'Grizzly' Gorman and his gang. The fifth was Yuma Jack Slade, your father!"

THE night wind snaked along the gulch. A wolf howled in the pine-clad hills. And Yuma Rose, her lithe body tense, stared silently with wide, probing eyes into Big John Blair's grim face.

"Maybe you knew all this, Mona, maybe not. Yuma Jack planned the robbery. The gold is cached up there in the hills, just where, we don't know. But Yuma Jack aims to meet up there with Grizzly Gorman's gang

tomorrow night at midnight, to divide the loot."

"Big John, are you sure?"

"Sure, yes. And sure Sheriff Kerry has laid a trap, aiming to round up the whole gang when they meet tomorrow night. Capture, with the gold on them, would mean a hang-noose for them all. For the others, I don't give a damn, but yore father—I couldn't hurt you—"

The girl came close to Big John, her wide eyes searching his strained, set face, and she guessed the terrible battle he must have fought with himself before deciding to turn traitor to old Boone Kerry.

"It's true, Big John," she said softly, steadily. "I found out two nights ago. What can I do?"

"You can tell yore father to stay out of the hills tomorrow night. Without proof, maybe—"

"I couldn't make him stay away. He's desperate. If he stayed away, the others would take all the gold. He wants the gold, more than he's ever wanted anything. And—I want it."

Amazement seeped into Big John's deep-set eyes. "You want gold that's stained with blood and death?"

"I didn't, at first. But father has shown me what it means to us both. I'm tired of slaving, tired of going down there to that hole every night and standing before drunken beasts. I hate them, hate this evil place!"

"We'd planned to go away, soon, together," said Big John. "I've saved up enough for that."

"It's too late, now. Yuma Jack won't turn back. He loves me, Big John, more than life. He's been ashamed of living on the money I made, wanted to fix it so I wouldn't have to slave after he died. He robbed for me. And I won't go back on him."

Big John stood a moment, the cool wind rustling his long tawny hair, his craggy features calm in the moonlight. His eyes were no longer tortured by indecision.

"I love you, too," he said. "And I won't go back on you."

Quick joy flooded her eyes. But she said: "I'm Yuma Jack Slade's girl. His wild blood's in my veins. You've already done too much for us, Big John. Now you'd better forget all about me."

"I couldn't forget you. I wouldn't want to go on livin' without you. Sabe, girl? I'm ridin' where you do—even if it's to hell!"

With a happy little laugh, she crept into his big arms.

A while later they went to the shack, where Yuma Jack Slade paced the neat but poorly furnished room with quick, nervous tread. Yuma Jack was a wiry, bitter-eyed old man, his hair and pointed mustache snow-white; a cold, bitter old man who loved only his slim-bodied daughter.

He stopped his pacing as the two entered. Regarded Big John with a slow, questioning stare that held no friendliness, even though he knew Mona loved the big Chillwater deputy. Big John had never entered the cabin before, and Yuma Jack's eyes were suspicious.

"What do you want here?" he asked coldly.

"He's going to help us," said the girl quickly.

"I need no help!"

Simply she told Yuma Jack what Big John had told her. "He's riding with us," she finished. "I won't go without him."

Again the old outlaw's shrewd, deliberate eyes probed at Big John's somber face. Then he nodded slowly.

"If you say so," he agreed.

THE hills were quiet, laced with streaks of moonlight beneath the black pines, as they rode the next night to keep their midnight rendezvous with Grizzly Gorman's renegades. They carried with them a loaded pack-horse, and an extra animal that would pack their share of the gold as they rode on across the

Dragoons to a new life in the Oregon country.

For division of the stolen gold would go through as planned. But the meeting place would be at a different spot, higher up, in wind-swept Blizzard Pass. Yuma Jack had got word to Grizzly Gorman of the change in plans, giving no reason, and had that day, single-handed, moved the gold to Blizzard Pass.

The hills, black and frowning, closed about them. They rode without speaking, for the most part. Big John Blair's thoughts, as they rode deeper into the hills, were jumbled, confusing. His face was a hard, somber mask. Warring emotions roiled in his heart.

But he felt no regret, had no thought of turning back, even though he knew that every thud of his gelding's hoofs carried him farther away from the life of self-respect and decency he had lived. He had refuted his oath to uphold the law, was breaking the trust old Sheriff Boone Kerry had placed in him, and remorse roweled him hard.

His gaze seldom left the lithe, beautiful figure of the girl riding ahead of him.

The hills became rougher, slashed by ridges and arroyos, raked by a chill night wind. Above them, a ragged gash against the moon-drenched sky, they could see Blizzard Pass. Occasionally, far below, they could see the flickering lights of Chillwater.

As they neared Blizzard Pass, Big John realized more fully what he had done. His father had been a lawman before him. He was breaking the stern creed of a lifetime, bartering his soul for love of a slim, red-haired daughter of an outlaw.

Yuma Jack's bitter, eager eyes never left the ragged notch ahead. The girl's were only a little less eager. Big John thought of the gold cached there, bought at the price of blood and death, and shook his massive head to clear it of tormenting thoughts.

As the black maw of Blizzard Pass loomed close ahead, Yuma Jack Slade called a halt.

"You two'll stay here," he said, "till I return with the gold."

"Why can't we ride on with you?" Mona asked quickly. "Won't we ride on through the Pass, afterwards, and down on the other side?"

"Yes. But it'll be best if Grizzly Gorman and his wolves don't see you, girl. And you, Blair—your hands've not been dirtied by this, so far."

"Only my conscience." Big John grinned sardonically.

"Wait here for me," the old outlaw ordered again. "If I'm not back in an hour, ride back down out of the hills."

He whirled his mount, vanished in the shadows.

Neither Big John nor the girl spoke for a while. Close in the moonlight, they stared into the shadows where Yuma Jack had vanished. Then Big John looked along their backtrail, an inky jungle of pine tops, silver-crested in the moonlight; the gleaming Chillwater River at the base of the hills; the red, winking lights of Chillwater town, far below.

Big John thought of old Boone Kerry, who ruled Chillwater with a speedy gun and cold nerve. Who had treated Big John like a son and trusted him. Who even now was up here in the hills to lay his guntrap for Grizzly Gorman's killers, not knowing that Big John had betrayed him. And fresh remorse gouged at the big deputy's heart.

"IT'S not too late," Mona spoke softly beside him. "I was wrong to want you to come. You're too good, too big, to run with our breed. You can go back, tell Boone Kerry something."

"I don't want to go back," said Big John. "I knew what would happen. Knew you'd go with yore father, that I'd go with you."

Again, as she had the night before, she crept into his great arms. And

Big John held her close, forgetting in the fierce thrill that shook him his remorse and self-contempt.

"You won't regret going," she whispered, her eyes misty. "You can't, when we're all happy on a little place of our own up in Oregon."

Big John said nothing, and long minutes passed. Instinctively they were gazing up toward Blizzard Pass. Big John was listening. For what, he didn't know. But Yuma Jack had hinted of some peril for him up there, and Yuma Jack was wise in the ways of the owl-hoot.

Half an hour passed. Utter silence, save for the moaning wind, held the hills.

Then suddenly that silence was ripped open by a wild rattle of gunfire. Big John was looking at the black mouth of Blizzard Pass when the first shots boomed out, and he saw orange tongues of flame slashing the darkness. The blasting, snarling guns slackened almost instantly, only to flare up with renewed rage, beating through the night to a furious crescendo.

Mona Slade tensed. "Father's in danger," she cried. "Do something, Big John. We must do something!"

Big John leaped atop his roan gelding.

"Wait here," he said flatly.

He raked the gelding with steel, and the powerful beast crashed through a cedar thicket and raced with pounding hoofs up the mountainside. The night wind beat at his face, drowning the thunder of hoofs fifty yards behind him as the girl followed.

Riding recklessly, blind to the peril of yawning chasms, he sent the roan hurtling into the narrow mouth of Blizzard Pass, aware that the roaring gunfire had stopped. Granite walls reared on each side, a funnel for the strong wind that came whooping through the pass.

A leaping fire winked suddenly at Big John from the canyon floor. Big John dragged the gelding to its haunches almost over the fire, his blazing eyes focusing with lightning speed on the scene etched in the scarlet circle of light.

Two men were on the ground across the fire, dead or wounded. One of the men was Yuma Jack Slade, the breast of his white silk shirt smeared with crimson, a smoking gun in his hand. The other was a wiry, hawk-faced breed. Three other men were stooping over Yuma Jack.

Grizzly Gorman had the body of a bear, with evidence of terrific strength in his hairy arms. Stiff, reddish beard sprouted from his broad face, almost hiding his staring eyes and slit of a mouth. One of the other two was a gaunt, one-eyed hombre with drooping mustaches. The other was fat, black bearded, with stark cruelty in his agate eyes.

On the ground beside the fire lay four unopened boxes which Big John knew contained the fortune in stolen bar gold.

Instantly Big John's flicking eyes read the sinister story, and the dead breed told him that Yuma Jack, his fears realized, had given a good account of himself before being murdered by Grizzly Gorman's wolves for his share of the gold.

As the roan's churning hoofs scattered the fire, the three whirled, surprise wiping the ugly greed from their faces. Their savage eyes raked the horseman, recognized him.

GRIZZLY GORMAN cursed suddenly. Clawed hands slapped against gun butts. Flame and lead stabbed at Big John Blair as the outlaw guns exploded.

The rearing roan saved Big John's life, as three bullets lanced into it. Big John flung himself from the saddle as the gelding crashed over backwards, landing on his feet with the agility of a big cat, a long-barreled gun in each hand. Feet spread wide, powerful shoulders hunched forward,

his tawny eyes blazed a reckless challenge to the three renegades.

The coughing booms from his big guns echoed along Blizzard Pass, roaring their crimson dirge. The outlaw guns blazed back, crisscrossing the narrow pass with murderous tongues of lead-fanged flame.

The gaunt hombre staggered suddenly, his one good eye flaring wide with the knowledge that he was about to die. He dropped his smoking gun, reeled a few steps, aimlessly, dropped abruptly to the ground as if to rest.

The thunder of raging guns rolled and crashed against towering walls. Gunsmoke fogged thick, whipped by the cold wind that moaned through the Pass.

The acrid sting of gunpowder in his nostrils, tawny hair wild in the strong wind, Big John triggered his hot guns. He was grinning, aware of a fierce satisfaction boiling in his heart. Momentarily, he had forgotten why he was here in Blizzard Pass.

Once again he was Big John Blair, lawman, his speedy guns blasting their deadly requiem for law-breakers.

A bullet ripped through the flesh of his thigh. Another seared red-hot alongside his skull. Pain and nausea rolled over him, and blood cascaded into his eyes. But he braced himself again, raised his hot guns.

And the fat outlaw went down, wallowing like an enormous hog on the ground.

Big John and Grizzly Gorman faced each other across twenty feet of space that boiled with gunsmoke. Gorman's bull-like body was hunched forward, his savage little eyes peering through the gunsmoke at Big John. A gun was in his hand, but he wasn't firing. He started toward Big John, walking stiff-legged, a grin twisting his flat, hairy face.

Deliberately Big John triggered his long-barreled gun, his arm recoiling with its kick and roar. Grizzly Gorman's great body shivered, but he still stalked forward. Big John pulled trigger again, and his heart tightened as the hammer clicked on spent chambers, for already he had discarded his other empty gun.

The red-bearded giant heard the empty clicks, stopped. Savage triumph flared in his fierce eyes. Deliberately his gun snaked up, his stubby finger tightening on the trigger.

Big John saw murder, stark and relentless, in the renegade's staring eyes. He hurled the empty gun at the killer. It missed, and Gorman laughed. Big John braced himself, despair in his heart, but fiercely glad that he would die as he had lived, a lawman.

A red rope of flame whipped suddenly across the campfire. Grizzly Gorman's thick body jerked, and death wiped the grisly triumph from his eyes as he went over backward.

Big John whirled.

Slim body tense, coppery hair free in the wind, Mona Slade stood over the body of Yuma Jack. In her hand was Yuma Jack's gun, smoke curling from its muzzle, anxiety in her eyes as she stared at Big John.

Big John went to her, took the pistol from her steady hand.

HALF an hour later they were ready for the trail. The bodies of the four dead outlaws, and that of Yuma Jack Slade, had been strapped onto their mounts. Big John, his wounds bandaged, had gone calmly, unhurriedly about packing the gold bullion on two of the pack animals, while the girl watched with a puzzled light in her brown eyes.

Now Big John stood a moment before mounting, staring down into the moon-drenched basin below, as if listening. Mona watched, and certainty supplanted the puzzlement in her eyes.

"Hadn't we better be riding on through the pass?" she asked softly.

Big John turned slowly. Their eyes held.

"We're not goin' on through the

pass," said Big John. "We're goin' back—to Chillwater!"

There was a moment's silence. Then Mona nodded. "I knew, as I stood there and watched you fight Grizzly Gorman's killers, that we'd go back to Chillwater. I knew I was watching the real Big John Blair—the lawman—and not the stranger who had ridden into the hills with me tonight. I didn't like that stranger, Big John. You're big, honest, and I was foolish to think you could ever be anything else. We won't see the Oregon country."

"We'll see Oregon," Big John declared. "But not till we've gone back to Chillwater. Not till we've told Boone Kerry the truth, and collected the five-thousand-dollar reward that has been offered for the return of this bullion. Then we'll see Oregon, if you'll go with me."

A soft smile touched Mona Slade's red lips. "I guess you couldn't keep me from following you, Big John, wherever you went!"

Exultantly Big John kissed the girl who had been known as the Yuma Rose. Then he lifted her into her saddle, mounted his own borrowed horse, and they rode in silence down out of Blizzard Pass toward a new, joyous life.

RED SEAL WESTERN

Two Smashing Rangeland Novels

HOLSTERS OF HIDDEN VALLEY

Outlaw Novel

By W. D. HOFFMAN

THE CRIMSON CAVALCADE

Action Novel

By LAWRENCE A. KEATING

And Short Stories by Your Favorite Authors

June Issue **Now on Sale**

STAR BLADES

4 FOR 10c

● MADE SINCE 1880 by the inventors of the original safety razor, Star Single-edge Blades have 56 years of precision experience stropped into their keen, long-lasting edges. If your dealer can't supply you, mail 10c for 4 blades to Dept. MG-4, Star Blade Division, 88 Johnson St., Bklyn., N.Y.

FIT GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

THEIR KEENNESS NEVER VARIES

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Author of "Recruits of the Buzzard," etc.

The Grim Reaper's Roundup

The night Larry Elver had hoped to win June Parslow's hand, he was fogging the vengeance trail for Drill Turrell, his father's killer. Turrell was a lead-fanged decoy who baited Larry on to heartbreak and tragedy. For the gun ghost doubled back to the kid's home range where his trigger treachery blasted June into a life of misery beyond the law.

THE tattoo of steel-shod hoofs cut in on the sounds of nocturnal revelry in the little town of Perez, Kenyo County. Three on-the-loose cowpunchers swung quickly away from the door of the livery stable when the big, dust-covered black bronc reared up in front of the

building in a wild pesade. Spume flecked the animal's quivering, snorting nostrils. Its hide was dripping sweat. The rider leaped clear of the kak and spoke tersely to a little hombre.

"Rub him down. Feed 'im good. Been ridin' all day." He, too, was caked with the dust of the trail and his weary features took on a cadaverous appearance in the pale light of a nearby street lamp. Turning, he walked stiffly toward a big frame structure across the street.

"Who d'yuh think it is?" a puncher clipped. "Man, he's been fannin' it!"

"D'yuh think it could—maybe—it's Elver's—"

The first speaker cursed softly, shook his head and moved slowly away.

Larry Elver, red-rimmed eyes haunted with a gnawing fear, heart cold and thudding sickeningly, clumped across the board sidewalk and burst into the sheriff's office. Two men eyed him quizzically, then exchanged glances.

One asked: "What's on yore mind, feller?" His eyes strayed over the rider's trail-beaten garb.

"Name's Elver—Larry Elver—from Solado. Dad—reckon yuh'll take me tuh him. How's he makin' it?"

A deputy sucked in his breath and tamped the glowing end of a cigarette against the leg of his chair. The other man coughed nervously, said:

"Be over at the Mirage if yuh want me, Sim."

"Yeah."

Young Elver grew cold all over. He cried out suddenly: "Why don't yuh say somethin'? Where is he? Dammit, I've been killin' a bronc tuh get here. Is he—"

The deputy said: "Come on, Elver, I'll take yuh tuh see him."

He walked out and the jaded rider stumbled at his heels mechanically. The gnawing fear resolved into an all-consuming dread when he realized where he was being led. The man in front of him paused near a grim building with a false front. Over the door was a sign that announced to the world that here was the undertaking parlor. Larry Elver reached out a clammy hand, gripped his companion's arm, and swung him around.

"He's dead! My dad's—"

The deputy nodded. "Sorry—feller. He never spoke a word. Died 'bout three hours ago. I'll l-leave yuh—here. Come over an' see me afterward, Elver. Yuh might want tuh know—how it—happened—kind of."

"Thanks," the dead man's son said mechanically. Like an automaton he entered the forbidding structure, his heart an aching void inside his powerful young frame. A stooped little man came out of a back room, his eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"I—I'm Larry Elver," the grief-stricken rider forced out from between set lips. "I—I'd like tuh see him. Sheriff—Elver—"

"Come right in," invited the undertaker to whom this sadness was an every-day job. He scratched a match against the door jamb and lighted a lamp that stood on a rickety shelf.

Elver, fighting a sob back into his throat, followed the motion of the man's hand. The bier was a crude one—two sawhorses supporting three or four planks. Through misty eyes Larry saw a profile, heart-breakingly familiar, that might have been chiseled out of stone, so immovable was it. He walked over hesitantly, then fell to his knees and buried his head in his arms. The undertaker went out and shut the door softly behind him.

LARRY ELVER stayed in that hallowed room for a long time, his eyes resting on the man who had been his father. He ran his fingers gently over the thin gray hair on the head, speaking aloud as though his father could hear.

"Reckon yuh knew it would come sooner or later. Never was a hombre

tuh live a peaceful life, was yuh, Dad? Ranchin' was too tame for a two-fisted old-timer like you. Hereabouts they'll all remember yuh as the best lawman who ever drew a Colt."

The son's fists clenched and his tear-blinded eyes hardened. "No man ever downed yuh with a fair shake. There ain't a man livin' that could. I aim tuh get the low-down an' I'll follow him tuh the gates of hell. I'll say good-by now, Dad. Can't do nothin' for yuh—but I can avenge yuh!"

He rose and walked out of the room in full control of himself now. Outside, the undertaker held something for him to see. It was a round leaden ball. Larry took it and turned it over curiously.

"The doc took it out of his chest," the man explained. "It ain't no ordinary slug, Elver. Thought maybe yuh'd want it."

"Thanks." Larry walked back across the street to the office that had been his father's. Outside, he paused to look at a reward notice pinned to a post. His blood boiled as he read:

$2,500 REWARD
Dead or Alive
DRILL TURRELL
Wanted for Robbery and Murder

There was no picture of the man. No description. Strangely enough, no two men ever had agreed in respect to the cataloging of the badman's features. Turrell had made his grim debut seven years before far to the south.

He had ridden into a small cowtown near the Arizona line with three henchmen one night. Not only had they robbed the bank, but they had taken the receipts of a road show which had been giving a performance in the town. Three men lay dead in the wake of Turrell and his little band of marauders. But the strangest part of the story—a legend, some old settlers would have it—was that a woman had gone with Turrell. A member of the theatrical troupe — young and pretty.

She had never been seen again. It was a matter of conjecture as to whether she had been taken forcibly or had gone of her own accord. It was mentioned that she had been seen with the badman in the dance hall of the town an hour or more before the robbery. The two had appeared to be on very friendly terms. From that time on, Drill Turrell became a scourge.

The deputy noted the turmoil in young Elver's eyes and said nothing for a while. Then: "Elver, yuh want tuh hear the story?" He indicated with a nod for his fellow lawman to leave him alone with the dead man's son.

Larry nodded and sat down, his hand clutching the instrument of death in a tight grip.

"Seems an hombre spotted a gent in Pine Bluff that he thought was Drill Turrell!" Mention of the dread name brought the man from Solado half out of his chair. "Sam — your father — went over there tuh take him. He got the badman, all right. A man who saw it all says the sheriff took both the feller's guns an' herded him out of town.

"A short time later they heard the sound of a shot, and a couple of riders high-tailed it out of town and along the road tuh Perez for about half a mile." The deputy paused and looked down at the floor. "They found—him —shot through the chest. Nobody kin figger what happened. 'Cept that the killer mustuh had a third gun. But no ordinary gun shoots a slug—like—"

"Like this," supplied Larry Elver, voice thick. "I got it here. Some day it'll be the death of that coyote. Dad —he—didn't suffer none?"

"He never come to, Elver. There was a look—in his eyes when they found him, the fellers said, like he'd seen somethin' that—well, like he'd seen death come ridin' straight at him. Surprise—not fear, mind yuh, feller.

Sam didn't know what fear was, goin' up tuh take Drill Turrell the way he did."

YOUNG Elver rose slowly. His lips formed the words "Drill Turrell." He stood in the middle of the floor looking into space, his right hand flipping the leaden ball into the air. The deputy stared at him, inwardly deciding that he wanted no such man as Larry Elver for an enemy.

Dryly he said: "Takin' his star, Elver?"

Larry shook his head. "Reckon I won't need one tuh kill a snake. Anybody figger which direction he headed?"

"A posse followed his tracks for quite a few miles. Toward the Dragon Peaks. Beyond them, Elver, there's country that could hide an elephant."

"I'll be ridin' that way first," Elver said. "Soon as my bronc gets a breather." He started for the door, stopped. "Figure I don't need tuh ask yuh tuh give dad a right send-off. He kind of liked a high place where he could look out over the world. I'd like a good headstone, too. Pay yuh when I come back this way."

"Ain't thinkin' none about money, Larry," the deputy said feelingly. "I'll guarantee that we'll do everything right."

"Thanks." Larry Elver walked out into the night. Two hours later a group in front of the Mirage Saloon watched him ride out of town. His jaw muscles seemed like white lumps on his face. His eyes glinted in the moonlight and when several men called a farewell, he simply raised his hand and kept his lips frozen into a thin line.

"There's one hombre I don't want tuh be—Drill Turrell!" a puncher whispered. "There goes hell on horseback."

By the time three more hours had passed, Larry Elver's stunned brain had begun to clear. Hate settled into one corner of his heart, and he began to reason sanely. The three-quarter moon hung high in the heavens in reminder of a tryst which he should have kept this very night. A tryst far back over the trails in a little willow-furbished Eden not a long distance from the Dreamy J ranch. There a girl was to have given him an answer to the most important question he had ever asked. He had loved that girl for years.

The world had seemed a beautiful place only a little over twenty-four hours ago. He had waited impatiently on the Z Bar until it should be time to ride to her. And then the news had come. A rider had raced into Solado in quest of Larry Elver. And when he had delivered his mission, the world had tumbled down around Larry. His soul had been stretched on the torture rack every inch of the way to Perez.

"June," he whispered, "yuh'll understand if yuh love me. I have faith that yuh won't mind waitin'. And if yuh was goin' tuh say 'no' tuh me, I reckon it won't matter then."

He had written a hasty note to the girl and had sent it by a puncher to the Dreamy J spread. As he rode along over the moon-drenched landscape, he could not know that the note never had reached June Parslow.

That the puncher had celebrated in Solado's saloon and had pulled the note out of his pocket along with a wad of sweat-stained money. It had been pounded into the mud by the hoofs of a dozen broncs. June Parslow had kept the tryst by the willows and, after waiting for a long time, had gone home to cry herself to sleep.

Larry told himself that he was doing the right thing, knowing that he could never rest easy until he had made forfeit the life of the man who had spilled his father's blood. And while he fought his inner battle, Larry thought of a man back in Solado—Dan McCall. The only man beside himself who had found favor in June Parslow's eyes.

There had been times when it seemed that he had had no chance against McCall, but just a week before June had appeared to be very happy with Larry at the dance at the Z Bar. He had found courage to ask her on the way home to be his wife. Woman-like, she had sparred for time.

"A week from tonight, Larry — at the willows. I'll give you my answer." But there had been a light in her eyes.

LARRY ELVER could hear her saying that again and a wild impulse momentarily seized him to swing the bronc around and race back to Solado. But the hate for Drill Turrell had taken possession of him. It reared its ugly head and drove the yearning from the rider's eyes.

His quest would not take long, his hate assured him. A few days—maybe weeks—months at the most. Ride Drill Turrell down! Blast his dirty soul into hell! Lips set with determination, the son of the dead Sheriff Elver loped down an incline toward a stretch of prairie studded with sage.

Far ahead sprawled a long line of grim peaks. Beyond them lay the owl-hoot terrain where men rode and skulked with wary eyes, hands ever close to gun butts, eyes full of suspicion when lighting upon a strange face.

For weeks — for months — Larry Elver wandered. At times he paused in a place just long enough to earn a few dollars. Men in far-flung settlements wondered at the hard-eyed stranger who always moved alone, who shunned companionship, who had a habit of flipping a leaden ball in a firm hand.

They spoke awesomely of the hellfire that smoldered in his eyes and of the way he looked at everyone who passed him by. Those who had talked to him reported that he could be pleasant enough if a hombre got close to him.

One night Larry Elver came toward a town that sprawled at the eastern shoulder of a low range of hills. It was on the far rim of the badlands. A sign hung drunkenly from a nail on the bole of a great oak. He read: HONDO—2 miles. The rider from Yogum County paused to light a smoke.

The cupped flame illuminated his face. An expression of hopelessness was in the eyes that a few months ago had glinted with determination. His bronzed cheeks had become a trifle gaunt. Mechanically he took the leaden slug from his pocket and flipped it in his hand, while he looked down upon the blinking lights of the town spread out below him. He took a few more puffs at his cigarette, then urged his bronc down the winding, dusty road.

A battery of curious eyes bored into the stranger when he rode into the plaza of Hondo. Larry took a swift inventory of the occupants of the town. For the most part they appeared to be a shifty-eyed, hard bitten crowd. He froze a trio of riders with a glance when he slipped from the roan in front of Hondo's saloon. One of them had seemed on the point of asking a question, but had swiftly changed his mind.

Taking a seat in an obscure corner of the place, he flipped that leaden slug idly. Once it slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. One of the customers picked it up, seemed to stiffen. He came over to the stranger's table and sat down.

"Where'd yuh git that?" he whispered to Larry, as he gave the slug to its owner.

Elver's eyes bored into the man's face and studied every twitch of the muscles. "Took it out of my father."

"Seen one like it before," the man explained. "They took it out of the skull of a gent who used tuh be in the express office here. A badman come in one night—a tall gent with a big hooked nose. That's all any of us remember about him. First thing we

know he's ridin' out of town with a sack of currency. Left the hombre in the express office dead. But we seen the hole in the feller's head—wa'n't made by no Colt."

"Sure," said Larry Elver bitterly, "easy tuh get a drop on a man when yuh have a third gun some place. Even when the man is watchin' yuh close. Drill Turrell?"

THE other snapped: "Easy, feller!" Then he nodded assent.

"Smart hombre," Larry clipped. "Leaves a dead man most every place he goes. Nobody ever gets a good look at him."

"They tell a story about Turrell," the man began, "about a woman—"

The sound in the smoke-fogged room died. A woman's scream broke and rolled from wall to wall. There followed the sound of a chair being pushed back suddenly — the crash of six-guns. Larry Elver leaped up and crossed the saloon floor.

A man was draped over a table and his body was beginning to slip to the floor. Blood smeared the smooth surface of the table. The body crashed to the floor. But Larry Elver's eyes were fixed on the tall man who held a smoking gun. The killer's eyes were shimmering with a deadly green light. Slowly those eyes turned to a slate gray. An icy laugh issued from the man's lips. Like a flash he whirled to face the cordon of men who pressed close.

"Anybody say he didn't go for his gun?"

No one responded. Men began to draw away. The killer holstered his gun.

"Nobody tells me I'm playin' crooked, an' lives," he rasped.

He walked out of the saloon. A few moments later the sound of his departure drum-rolled from the dark street.

"Speakin' of killings," Larry Elver remarked to the man who had addressed him, "well—" He grimaced and moved toward the door. "Y-yuh see his eyes?" He did not wait for an answer. It occurred to him that he could not remember much about the gunman's features, his garb. Those changing eyes had completely absorbed Larry's power of observation.

Far out of Hondo the futility of his hunt assailed Larry Elver. His thoughts turned to June Parslow and his soul cried out for her. It seemed years since he had spoken to the girl, feasted his eyes on her loveliness. When he made camp in the hills, he was resolved to forget his urge to get Drill Turrell. He would ride back to Solado. Yet when he closed his eyes, Larry knew that he was lying to himself.

At dawn the manhunter had no other thought but to go on. Turrell had left a bloody wake. Larry Elver had been shown three other leaden pellets. A sheriff's widow near the Idaho line had told him of one. There was a stage passenger lying dead in a cowtown through which he had passed three days later. The driver told of another passenger. That passenger had worn no guns. The stage driver was sure, for he had searched the man before permitting him to climb aboard. Yet when the stage reached town, only one man was inside the coach and he was dead, his shirt front a huge red splotch. The sound of the shot had been drowned by the rattle of rocks against the wheels.

THREE weeks later young Elver rode through the night that blanketed the badlands behind the Dragoon Hills. In an isolated mining town to the south, he had heard whisperings that Drill Turrell had ridden that way after the holdup of a Wells-Fargo coach. Someone had said that he had seen Turrell. The badman had had a heavy growth of beard, bushy eyebrows, a hooked nose.

"Changed since the last word I got on the snake," Larry Elver had

ground out before swinging back toward the north.

There was little moonlight along the rocky trail. The sky was a great sable ceiling studded with diamonds. From off in the distances came the howls of night prowlers. The thought of June Parslow occupied Larry's musings.

It was the roan that warned Larry of riders on the trail ahead. Hoofbeats cracked sharply against the shale. The sounds came closer and closer. The man from Yogum County swung his horse sharply from the beaten path and sent it plunging into a clump of pine fifty yards away.

He slipped from the saddle, spoke gently to the bronc, patting its quivering neck. Two horsemen hove into view and Larry caught a flash of white in the darkness. Suddenly they stopped with a rattling of bit chains and creak of saddle leather. Larry reached toward his gun and waited. A voice floated over to him, a harsh testy voice.

"I'm splittin' with yuh here, Tonto. Don't come near me unless yuh git a different bronc. Yuh drew that lawman's fire because of the white splash on that black's head. Yuh'll be spotted until yuh ditch that cayuse. The boss'll drill yuh if yuh ride down intuh Yogum County an' git picked up. Even if yuh're in jail, he'll git yuh. Yuh was ridin' that horse when—"

A sneering answer came. "Reckon yuh know where I can buy me a new bronc without goin' near the cowtowns, yuh smart hombre? They're plumb scarce in the owl-hoots."

"Shore—I got the word from Anson over in Hondo. Go tuh a place outside Solado—Wolf Bluffs. Yuh'll find a little spread there—man name of McCall—keeps broncs an' doesn't ask no questions. The boss planted a gent down there an' he's workin' for McCall."

Larry Elver choked off a surprised curse. McCall. Had that been the name? Near Solado? Not Dan McCall. It could not be. McCall was Seldon's deputy. A cold hand closed over his heart. Outlaws heading for Solado. Moving into Yogum County. Larry Elver thought of Drill Turrell, and he knew now that his next move would be toward home.

"I'll take a different road," the first night rider rasped. "Meet yuh in Solado, Tonto." He laughed harshly and Larry heard his horse respond to the spur and make down a slope.

THE other outlaw continued along the trail and when the sounds of his going had died, Larry Elver swung to his own saddle and rode out of the pines. Back over the way he had come, there was a trail that slanted off into an arroyo. He sensed that it led in the general direction of Yogum County many miles to the southwest. He rode back to it, stopped the roan, and listened.

Finally he sent the animal loping along the dry bed of the river. Once or twice he heard sounds out of the night that betrayed the presence of men. He gave them a wide berth. In a sandy wash he stopped for a hurried breakfast, fed his horse and watered it at a narrow, gurgling stream.

Later, upon reaching a high bench, Larry scanned the horizon, then rode south at an easy gait. With each passing mile, his heart lost some of the ache that had harassed it for countless days. Each step of the roan carried him that much nearer to June Parslow. Before many hours, he hoped that the girl would be in his arms.

At dusk familiar landmarks began to appear. He pulled his roan up in the shadows of a couple of cottonwoods that stood on the crest of a long ridge. He could look down on part of the Dreamy J ranch and see the wall of willows that lined a sparkling river. It was at a bend in that river that he and June were to have met that night so long ago.

A lump welled up into the rider's

throat. Loneliness took hold of him when he rode down the long slope on the far side of the ridge and picked up a rutted, familiar road that led to the Parslow ranch. No glad song filled his heart when the gates of the Parslow ranch loomed up in the dusk. The wild, joyous yell that he had planned to let loose when he rode into the yard died in his throat.

A harmonica solo from a puncher in front of the long bunkhouse broke off abruptly when Larry Elver rode into the light. A tall waddy straightened, pushed back his hat, and craned his head.

Then he yelled: "It's Larry Elver! Why, dang yore hide—"

The tired horseman slid to the ground and grinned at the men who flocked out to meet him.

After they had pumped his hand, one said: "Thought yuh was daid. Guess yuh lost that foreman's job yuh had at the Z Bar. Old Eggers waited a month fer yuh. How yuh been, Larry?"

They all read the question in the returned puncher's eyes. Those eyes were turned toward the ranch-house in hungry anticipation. They swept over the rest of the buildings and finally returned to the welcoming waddies. He wondered then why none of them would meet his glance. No light gleamed in the window of the little room at one end of the house. June had always kept her light burning. It was not late enough for her to have gone to bed.

At last he found courage to blurt out: "June—I reckon I'll go up an' see—"

A short cowpuncher cleared his throat noisily. "Ain't there, Larry."

Another of the men suddenly remembered he had work to do inside the bunkhouse.

A GANGLY member of the group hastily cut in: "Why don't yuh go up an' see Parslow? He'd like right well tuh see yuh, Larry. Always said he wished yuh'd quit the Z Bar and—"

Misgiving sapping the strength from his legs, Larry Elver nodded wordlessly and turned to walk hurriedly up the hill to the big log house. Once he looked around quickly and saw that the punchers were grouped together, staring after him. He strode across the wide porch and knocked on the door.

Parslow's voice barked from inside: "Come on in." Larry lifted the heavy latch and entered the big living room.

June Parslow's father stared at his caller, then he bolted from his chair, hand outstretched.

"Larry Elver! Well, blast my heart!" he roared. "Where in the world have yuh been?" He waved a gnarled hand toward a chair. "Heard about your dad, Larry. Was shore sorry tuh know it. But why did yuh stay away?"

"Tuh kill a snake," the rider said absently, his roving eyes noting that the place had lost the touch of a feminine hand. "Where's June, Mr. Parslow?"

The old man's face fell. "Seems like yuh stayed away too long, son," he said at last. "She kind of understood why yuh didn't meet her at the willows. She waited a long time, Larry, but yuh never showed up. Yuh didn't write her a line."

"Listen—tell me," Larry cracked, "tell me the truth."

"She's Mrs. Dan McCall, Larry," old Parslow said.

Young Elver went cold all over and his heart seemed to stop beating. In a daze he got up and walked slowly to the door. He wanted to hear no more just yet. But Parslow's voice whispered hoarsely behind him:

"If it'll kind of take away the sting, Larry, I always hoped it'd be you that married my girl."

The punchers out in front of the bunkhouse were discreetly silent when Larry Elver swung up to his roan. If there was anything stronger

in his heart than his love for June, then it was hate for the man who had robbed him of his two most dear possessions. There was only one thing left for him in life now. To hunt down Drill Turrell. His heart was a whirlpool of conflicting emotions when he rode into the town of Solado.

Seldon, the sheriff, recognized him when he walked into the saloon. The lawman cursed softly when he read the change in Elver's face. He drew his breath in sharply as he watched Elver walk to the bar and order whiskey. Without hesitation he followed the young man and touched him on the arm.

"Son—yuh never used that stuff before."

Larry replied: "Reckon not, Seldon. But they say yuh can forget easy when yuh drink it."

Seldon understood. "So yuh heard, Larry? Reckon we was all a little bowled over when she done it. But maybe it was because of what happened tuh Dan McCall. Women—"

From the far end of the street near the Stockmen's Bank came the boom and crash of guns. Men boiled out of the saloon. In the next instant they flattened, hurling themselves toward any shelter that presented itself. For lead was being pumped at them from down the darkened street. A street lamp was shattered when a rifle bullet lanced it. Near the hitchrack a man went down to stay.

LARRY ELVER and Sheriff Seldon ducked out the back way, raced along in the darkness in the rear of the frame buildings. They came to a narrow areaway and slanted into it. There the sheriff stopped, and let his Colt blaze. A man toppled from a horse out in the street and rolled over and over. There came the sound of boots running swiftly along a plank walk, and Larry Elver tore through the alley, hit the street in time to see a trio of riders streak out of town. Two of them were twisted in their saddles, pouring rifle fire down Solado's main street.

Seldon yelled: "Grab the broncs. They've robbed the bank!" He wasted but a glance on the two dead men lying in the hoof-churned street and headed for the hitchrack.

Astride his own bronc, Larry Elver clipped: "The wolves didn't lose no time. I wonder if maybe—"

A wild hunch seized him and he sent the roan catapulting down the wide street. He picked up the old stage road that led toward the south, rode along it for several miles before he came to an old, weed-choked mine road. Half an hour of riding along that brought him to its end. The rotting timbers of an abandoned mine leaned drunkenly against a rocky hillside.

At that point Larry swung his horse toward a high bank, and the animal fought its way up to a stretch of bare range. On the far side, a drab line of rocky ledges began with a stretch of timber behind. A canyon afforded an entrance into the rough terrain. The rider moved along the rocky floor and up a steep incline until he found himself swallowed up in the shadows of giant trees.

There he dismounted and tied his bronc securely. He went ahead on foot until he was outside the narrow belt of timber and looking down from a high eminence that was a part of Wolf Bluffs. Below him was a sort of clearing in a chaos of rock, brush, and tall grass. A thin tendril of smoke curled from a chimney of a low, rambling sod hut. Nearby was a long, ramshackle building that looked on the verge of collapse. A small corral was visible in back of it.

"Reckon that old place has got a tenant," the rider whispered. "But it can't be McCall. It can't be! Guess my ears played tricks with me."

He lay there for about an hour, his eyes fixed on the layout, his heart beating wildly. The light that blinked

in the window of the sod hut affected him strangely. Suddenly he stiffened and flung himself flat on the ground. Horsemen were coming out of the timbers, heading down the steep trail that led to the clearing.

A rough, gloating voice cracked: "There's the place. We'll git fresh broncs an' a change of scenery. Shore circled back pretty on that lawman."

Like ghostly centaurs, the outlaws moved through the gloom and down the steep bank. The watcher could have downed them all, yet his hand did not touch his Colt. A voice inside of him had hissed a warning. At the foot of the trail, one of the riders whistled shrilly. A rectangle of light appeared in the side of the sod hut and someone looked out.

The door shut and a lantern flashed at the corner of the shed. The night riders dismounted swiftly. A squat man crossed the yard and snagged their broncs. After stripping them of leather, he led them hurriedly toward a thicket in back of the sod hut, while the owners ducked swiftly into the shed. Not one motion down there was wasted. It seemed a ritual that had been followed before. Chinks of light appeared in the flimsy shed walls.

In a few minutes the squat individual returned, leading three horses. The men came out of the shed and hastily picked up saddles and bridles. One of the riders was wearing a high-crowned light gray hat. Larry was sure that none of them had worn it on the way in. With the precision of long practice, they rigged the broncs, swung to the kaks, and rode toward the ascent that would take them back through the timbers and the hidden canyon.

HEART thumping, Larry Elver hugged the damp loam and watched the men pass by not fifty yards from where he lay. When the sound of their horses' hoofs had died in the stillness, he rose and made his way back to where his own bronc was tied. In less than five minutes he was riding down the steep trail into the clearing.

At the corner of the shed, the squat man was crouched on watch and the moonlight glinted on the blue steel of a Colt which he clutched in his hand. Larry raised a hand when he rode up close and dismounted.

"Reckon I got a little mixed up. Separated from the boys," he said quietly. He got down and strode swiftly toward the sod hut. "McCall in?" he snapped at the guard who was dogging his steps.

"Yeah—but lemme git a look at yuh. Don't remember them other hombres sayin' there was another one comin'. Yuh—"

Larry Elver ignored the man and reached for the latch of the door. With a sudden thrust of his hand, he pushed it open. Then he uttered a strangled cry, falling back a step from sheer surprise. A man sat in a wheel chair, six-gun clutched in his hand, his lower limbs covered with a blanket.

The face lighted by a lamp in a far corner of the room was young. A shock of black hair, thinly streaked with premature white, topped a handsome, gaunt face. Bitterness filled the eyes that looked at Larry Elver, a bitterness that failed to hide the sudden gleam of surprise. For young Elver had known this man before, had known Dan McCall in health.

Larry's eyes were drawn to the girl who stood braced against a table. She seemed more beautiful than ever, despite the fact that her face had lost some of its rich color. The wide, staring eyes no longer sparkled. Her lips quivered as they spoke his name.

"L-Larry!"

"Hello, June. Hello, Dan," he forced out. "Heard the news at the Dreamy J. But they didn't tell me everything, Dan. Have yuh been laid up?"

A wry grin appeared on the face of

the man in the wheel chair. "Yeah—just a little." He flashed a look at the girl, then laughed mirthlessly. "Where yuh been, Larry? What yuh doin' here?"

Not until then did he put the Colt away. Larry Elver noted swiftly that the right arm of the chair had been removed. He swung his gaze to the girl, but she had turned from him and was staring out the window. Her shoulders moved spasmodically as he watched, and he saw that her fingers clung to the edge of the table.

McCall spoke: "Don't seem much of a place for us, eh, Larry? Not what yuh'd think I'd provide for June." He seemed to be reading the visitor's thoughts, and his eyes became smoky. "We have our reasons for livin' like this, Elver!" His voice became vibrant with bitterness. "Ask Seldon in Solado! Ask him why we're here!"

June cried out: "Dan—please—"

"Reckon there's somethin' I don't know, Dan," Larry said kindly. "Didn't stay long in Solado. Didn't have time tuh find out much. There was a raid on the Stockmen's Bank—"

The man in the chair stiffened a little. "Then I'll tell yuh, Elver," he burst out. "It don't sound pretty. I'm a cripple! I'll never walk again. I'm a half-dead man that has tuh be cared for like a child. Yuh ever think how that'd feel?" A jerky laugh burst from his lips and he pounded his paralyzed knees with clenched fists. "Yeah—yuh could stab 'em with a knife an' I wouldn't feel it!"

LARRY'S throat tightened. He pictured Dan McCall as he had last seen the man, a broad-shouldered, handsome young puncher swinging up to a black bronc. A man with a pair of powerful, lithe limbs. He looked at June. The girl was moving toward the door of another room.

"Dan—reckon I'm sorry tuh hear all this," the visitor said huskily. "Seems a hell of a world when a thing like that can happen tuh a man."

McCall opened his lips to speak when the door suddenly opened. A tall man crashed into the room, almost colliding with June. The fellow had a long, hooked nose and a stubble of blue beard. There was hardly any brows over his piercing eyes that were colorless in the lamplight.

"McCall," he grunted out, swinging a hostile glance at Larry Elver, "who's this hombre?"

"Friend of mine. What yuh want?"

"The bronc yuh handed me is crowbait. Tate's gittin' me another one," the hard-bitten visitor cracked.

"Sure—that's all right," the crippled man said in a hollow voice. Fear was drawing the blood from his wife's face. "Better start ridin' if yuh've got what yuh want."

The man grinned evilly and ogled June McCall. "Yeah. Guess I got what I want—fer now!" He went out. No one spoke until the sound of his horse had faded into the distance.

Then Larry Elver spoke. "Dan—how long yuh think yuh'll get away with that?"

The man in the chair swung his face toward his one-time rival. "Long enough tuh git money tuh git out of this damn' country, Elver," he ripped out, eyes burning. "I played *with* the law until I—until this happened tuh me! What d'yuh think they done for me? Give me a hundred dollars—and I threw it in their faces.

"Reckon the only way I can keep me an' June from starvin' is tuh work against the law. I swap and sell broncs, Elver, d'yuh hear? I don't ask no questions. Maybe—maybe yuh figure on turnin' me in?" He laughed shortly. "Reckon I'd even kill yuh, Elver, if yuh tried it. They'll never get me. Not while I can still fan a gun."

"I'm thinkin' of June," Larry said.

"You needn't waste pity on me, Larry Elver," the girl suddenly blazed. "I don't want it. We can take care of ourselves. Go on about your business. Leave us alone."

She clapped her hands to her face and ran into the little lean-to room, slamming the flimsy door.

"Yuh thought a lot of June," Dan McCall spoke. "Yuh loved her, Elver. Maybe if yuh hadn't gone—" His tone was bitter. "Yuh better not come here any more. I don't like the way yuh looked at her, Elver. She's my wife and if yuh're thinking— Damn yuh, I'd ought tuh kill yuh where yuh stand. Standin' on two good legs—" He sank back against the chair and cursed. "Elver, reckon I didn't know what I was sayin'. Guess yuh better go now. An' stay away."

"Sure," Larry said evenly, "but I reckon, Dan, that I'd change places with yuh any day. Good night."

He hurried out into the night. He was conscious of Tate's grim scrutiny as he rode out of the clearing. June McCall's face haunted him. The expression in her eyes, when she had looked at him as he walked through the door of her cabin, was stamped indelibly on his brain. At first there had been a wild, joyous light before it had become swamped by recollection.

She must love the man who had become her husband, thought Larry, to leave the Dreamy J for a home such as McCall had provided. And she was lost to Larry Elver forever. He tried to remember that. A wall existed now between himself and the woman whom he held most dear.

HE RODE aimlessly toward Solado, feeling that a song would never pass his lips again. In town he went straight to the sheriff's office. The lawman sat in a chair batting trail dust from his ten-gallon hat. His shirt was soaked with sweat, and helpless rage brought low curses from his lips.

"See any trace of 'em?" he shot at Elver. "Which trail did you follow?"

"Kind of give it up when I got out a ways, sheriff," Larry replied. "Yuh see, I happened in on Dan McCall an'—"

The sheriff nodded comprehendingly and his lips tightened.

Larry went on: "McCall was yore deputy, Seldon. What happened tuh him? His legs— Hell, it don't seem right nohow, man!"

"It happened six months ago," the lawman said slowly. "Near as I can remember, there was two fellers playin' cards in a room over to the hotel. One drilled the other, an' Dan went up tuh git him. He got the feller cold an' took his guns away, then drove him over tuh the jail. He'd just locked the gent up an' was turnin' away when he got it in the back. He went down an' the gent reached out an' took his keys. That's all, all that Dan seems tuh know."

Larry Elver exploded: "No guns? My dad went down that way, Seldon. Looks like Turrell stopped over in Solado. McCall must've got a good look at him. Bein' the only man I've met who lived after one of those slugs hit 'im, he should be able tuh—"

"Said he had a sharp nose, long an' thin. A dark mustache and an eye that dropped at one corner—"

Larry Elver swore softly and shook his head. Then: "When did—when did Dan marry June Parslow?"

"A week or so after it happened, Larry. Seems like she couldn't say no tuh McCall when he— Well, yuh know how women are."

"That's the kind of woman she is," said Larry. "There will never be another like her." He turned his head so that Seldon would not be able to see his eyes. Rising, he walked toward the door, one hand flipping a leaden slug. "See yuh again, Seldon," he said huskily and went out.

All the next day the young rider fought the urge to mount his roan and ride out of the country for good. Life without June McCall held nothing for him but a mad desire to find Drill Turrell. After he had found the man and had riddled him with lead, there would be nothing left. But the thought of the outlaw who had feast-

ed his eyes on June's loveliness made his decision. A man could take a woman easily from a husband who had no legs.

Men who drifted in and out of the Solado saloon wondered at the lean-jawed young rider who sat alone. Each noted his peculiar habit of flipping a leaden ball over and over in a sun-browned hand. Many knew him and spoke. Others strange to the town noticed the look in his eyes, the way he wore his guns, and gave him wide berth.

Toward dusk an all-compelling desire to see a certain place near the Dreamy J sent Larry Elver toward the livery stable. He rode out of Solado. A soft wind riffled the leaves of the oaks along the road to Parslow's. The massed cries of tiny night creatures accentuated the utter loneliness that enveloped Larry Elver's soul. He rode at last toward a clump of willows that he knew so well. Nearby a silvery stream rippled. Was it years or only months since he was to have met June Parslow here? The girl who was now June McCall. He got out of the saddle.

Head bared, young Elver wandered to a log that was hidden in the shadows and sat down upon it. How long he had been there in the solitude, he could not tell. Suddenly the muffled beat of a horse's hoofs reached his ears. He looked up and saw a rider. A soft voice spoke to the bronc and it stopped.

Heart racing, Larry Elver got up and walked across the grass. The rider had slipped to the ground and was leaning wearily against the chestnut horse. Something that sounded like a stifled sob reached Elver's ears. The rider's hat fell to the ground. Moonglow turned her mass of golden hair into a luminous halo.

Larry whispered: "June!"

STARTLED, the girl swung to face him. Instantly she lifted a boot to the stirrup, but Larry caught her by the arm gently and held her.

"Look at me, June," he pleaded. "Tell me why yuh come here. Is it for the same reason that I—I came? I've got tuh know, even though yuh belong tuh him."

"Let me go—please," the agitated girl cried in a choked voice. "I only stopped here on my way to dad's. I like to look at the river— Let go of my arm, Larry. You seem to forget—"

"Forget? How could I?" young Elver forced out, his voice betraying the turmoil inside of him. "I can never forget. Yuh know that—"

"Yet you went away without a word," the wife of Dan McCall reminded him. "I heard about your father and I was awfully sorry. But I waited and waited until—"

"But my note— I asked yuh tuh wait, June," Larry pleaded for understanding. He did not relinquish her arm. "I told yuh that I had a job tuh do. I thought if yuh loved me, yuh wouldn't mind waitin' for a little while. It wasn't so long, June, when yuh think—"

June McCall's eyes swung up to his and he saw anguish in their depth. "A note? Larry, I never received a note from you." She turned away again. "I waited—Larry. You stayed away, so Dan McCall asked me to marry him. I was not very sure that I loved him—then. But after, when that terrible thing happened—"

"Yuh couldn't say no then," Larry Elver finished for her. "He's crippled, June. But he's got more than I'll ever have. Just losin' the use of your legs is no handicap when yuh have a wife like June Parslow."

He trapped his lips when he saw the woman drop her head into her hands. "June," he whispered gently, "look at me and say yuh don't love me. Then I'll believe—"

She turned toward him again. Her face was white and the crimson lips were set with effort. "Don't ever say that to me again, Larry Elver. I'm Dan McCall's wife. You think I'd

marry a man I didn't love? I—I do not love you any more." She stood there stiffly, her fists clenched, her eyes clashing with his. "I want you to go away. I don't ever want to see you again."

The young man flinched. "Reckon I'm sorry, June," he said. "I'll never speak of it again."

He left her then, found his horse and swung to the kak. At a mad gallop he rode away from the spot he had hallowed in his mind these long, weary months. The churn of his horse's hoofs drowned out the convulsive sobs of the girl. He did not look back, so he could not see that she had slumped into a little heap on the grass.

Despite the girl's words a storm of exultation was stirring in Larry's blood. Her lips had lied, but he knew her eyes too well. In those glowing pools he had seen the same light that had glowed the night he had taken her home from the dance.

The thought tempered the ache in his heart, although he knew June belonged to Dan McCall and would until death parted them. He wondered how many times she had ridden out there to their trysting place—alone.

In Solado Larry walked into the lunchroom across the street from the post office. Four men sat along the counter, two apparently together. One wore a large gray hat. His nose was long and thin and a scar cut across his forehead. Larry's eyes wandered to the woman behind the counter.

She was a stranger to Solado since Elver had been gone. Any age from thirty to fifty would have fitted her. A thick coating of rouge attempted to cover the lines in her face, and the hair that was pushed back from her forehead and confined in a knot at the back of her neck was no longer jet black. Long ago she must have been beautiful.

Larry ordered coffee. While waiting for it, he saw the man with the scar finish his dish of ham and eggs. The fellow rolled a querly and rammed it between gleaming white teeth. Involuntarily Larry followed his usual habit of flipping the leaden slug in his hand as he eyed the woman behind the counter.

Suddenly the small object fell from his fingers and hit the counter where it rolled toward the man with the scar. A curse cut the comparative silence as his fingers struck for the slug. Larry Elver's hand closed over it a split second ahead of the stranger's.

"Reckon I wouldn't want tuh lose that," he said quietly. "It's a kind of remembrance." He held it up between thumb and forefinger. "Just a lead ball I found once."

His eyes were close to those of the man who sat beside him. His spine began to crawl when the slate-gray eyes of the man with the scar began to change color. Slowly a green tinge clouded them and the man's whole body seemed to stiffen. Quickly they swung away and for a brief instant fell in line with the face of the woman behind the counter. A plate crashed to the floor.

Wordlessly the man with the scar swung off his stool. Hooking a thumb over his shoulder, he said to his companion: "Let's be ridin', Kells."

WITH pounding heart, Larry Elver watched them stride out of the place. He did not overlook the way the big hombre had his guns tied down. He noted well the catlike walk. Larry had watched the fellow's hands while he was eating.

They had never known the burn of a lass-rope, nor the callouses that come from work on the range. A faint roaring inside of his head, Larry tossed a coin to the counter and slid from his stool. A hand reached out and clutched his arm. A pair of dilated eyes stared into his and struck him cold.

"Reckon yuh're maybe thinkin' I'm crazy," the throaty voice whispered.

"I saw that thing yuh was tossin' in the air. I've seen one like it before now. Maybe yuh're lookin' fer a man?" Her lips twisted into an icy smile. "Same as me!"

"Maybe," replied Larry, when the other two customers got up and went out into the night.

"I think I've found the one I'm lookin' fer," the woman went on. "His eyes—I saw 'em. There is only one man who—" The words seemed hollow.

Elver gripped her arm. "Who is it?"

A gunshot ripped the stillness of the night, its sharp echo resounding from the false fronts that lined Solado's wide main street. Larry Elver was on the floor when a second bullet drilled through the window of the lunchroom. Broken glass made tinkling sounds on the floor. In the street men's voices rose to yells.

Larry got up, saw that the woman was not where he had last seen her. He leaned over the counter and saw her lying on the floor in a grotesque heap. A red splotch on one side of her head. Sickened at the sight, the young rider turned his head away just as Sheriff Seldon and several men dashed into the place.

"What happened, Elver?"

"Some skunk drilled a woman from the dark," was the sharp response. "Ever hear of anythin' lower in animal life than that? Tried tuh get me, too. I've got a bullet burn on my shoulder. She was goin' tuh tell me something about a gent with a big nose."

He cursed softly, spun on his heels, and ran into the street. The sheriff eyed one of his deputies when he heard Elver's roan pounding out of town.

"Reckon he might be headin' for a certain place. Give him a start. Then we'll hit the trail."

The thought crowded in Larry Elver's brain as he rode out of Solado that the murderer of the lunchroom waitress might be headed for Dan McCall's place. He had looked like one of the outlaws who had switched broncs there the preceding night. He might be going to do so again.

There was a chance that Sheriff Seldon or his men had tagged the bronc he had ridden into town. He would probably recognize how slim his chances of reaching the more remote owl-hoot territories were.

Larry followed the stage road for almost three miles, cut sharply away from it, and rode across a stretch of prairie dotted with sage. He picked out a rough trail that led up a steep rise to a high table land. Along the edge of it, he rode swiftly, sweeping the moonlit panorama below him with glittering eyes. Finally he picked out a thin stretch of timber, saw the twinkle of a man-made light. Soon the dim shapes of two horsemen moved across the floor of a valley.

"Goin' in by the way of the timber," the watcher concluded. "Reckon I'll go in the front way."

He jerked a rifle loose from its scabbard, while the roan slid down the side of a steep bank in a shower of gravel. Feeling solid ground under its feet, the animal laid its ears back and ate up distance with great strides.

At a willow thicket not far from the low range of rocky tors that screened the McCall place from the world, the manhunter paused and searched for signs of a road that would lead into it. The sound of rippling water came from off to the right, and he rode that way. At a wide stream he took time to peer along its course for a remembered bridge. A few minutes later he was thundering over its loose planks, then riding along a beaten path that led into the hills.

ELVER rode into the McCall ranch just as two men slid from their kaks in front of the old shed. The squat man who met them yelled a warning and crashed the lantern

against a rock. A Colt's roar followed and a bullet fanned Larry's cheek. He slipped from the roan, took a pot-shot at one figure which, bent double, was running into the shed.

Two stabs of flame vied with the moonlight, and Larry hurled his body toward the screen afforded by a great uprooted tree. Chunks of rotted wood splattered his face when he unlimbered his Colt again. His shot dashed the gun from the hand of the squat man who cursed insanely and groveled on his knees in search of it. Again Larry fired, and a man standing near the sod hut caved at the knees. The sound of splintering boards informed Elver that the man in the shed was smashing his way through the far side.

The thought of the man with the scar robbed young Elver of caution. He plunged toward the cleared section of the rude layout, his Colt pumping lead into the sides of the flimsy shed. A figure raised itself from the ground and the flash of light on a gun barrel sent Larry ducking for shelter behind a rock. He saw the man running for a black horse then. The fellow did not wear a gray hat now.

Just before grabbing for the saddle-horn, the fugitive whirled on his heels and fed lead toward his pursuer. A window opened somewhere and a stab of fire came from the hut. Another. The sudden attack from that angle sent Larry Elver to cover again.

He heard a man's voice yelling loud curses as the owner roweled a horse up the steep trail that led to the timber. Larry tried to get a shot at him, but when his head rose a fraction of an inch from shelter, a gun would roar from the window of the hut.

Sheriff Seldon raced into the clearing, a dozen riders behind him. The fire from the hut died and Larry Elver yelled: "Up the bank, Seldon. That skunk is getting away!" The roar of gunfire drowned his words and a wild, derisive yell skirled down from the shadows that stretched from the timber.

"Reckon we got here a mite late," drawled the sheriff as he walked up to the squat man who was leaning against the mud hut, one hand clutching a bleeding arm. "Take him," the lawman said to a deputy. Then he kicked the door of the hut open and called out: "Don't make a move, Dan! Yuh wouldn't live three seconds."

Larry Elver was looking down at the dead outlaw when the portent of what he had done ripped through his consciousness. He had led the sheriff to the McCall ranch, had played a Judas roll unwittingly. He stared through the open door, and saw Dan McCall sitting in his wheel chair, gun clutched in his right fist.

"Where's the dirty coyote who brought yuh here?" the cripple's husky voice reached Elver's ears.

"GUESS I didn't think fast enough, Dan," said Larry as he appeared in the doorway. "The rat I chased here just killed a woman in town. I was so plumb anxious tuh—"

June McCall stood by the wheel chair, her lovely face a mask of scorn. She said to Larry in a muffled voice: "If I had known it was you outside, I would have shot straighter!"

To Seldon she said: "It takes a brave man to fight a man who lives in a wheel chair! You gave him no chance to live honestly—none of you. For all you cared, he and his wife could starve. We preferred this to charity. This way of living. Go ahead and—arrest us, sheriff—in the—name of—the law!"

She broke, and slumped down beside the chair, crying bitterly. Dan McCall's face was white and twisted with helpless rage as he dropped a hand to her tousled head. The gesture sent a barb through Larry Elver's heart.

"Listen tuh me, Dan," he said. "Reckon I didn't plan it this way. A

gent shot a woman in town. All I knew was that I wanted tuh get my hands on him. I—"

Seldon cut in: "I'm sorry, Dan. Been suspectin' yuh for some time. I'm smashin' up this horse-tradin' business of yours. Killers have got away through you, Dan McCall. Rotten killers. I'll see that yuh get paid for the broncs. I'll auction them off in Solado. Yuh'll realize quite a sum—"

Dan McCall's lips shook violently. "Sorry I can't git down on my knees tuh thank yuh, Seldon." He spat to the floor with derision. "But yuh see they won't hold me up." His satirical laugh shook every man in the room. "Yuh'll excuse me, won't yuh?"

"Dan," Seldon said gently, "I know we wasn't in position tuh do what we should have in Solado, but—" He spun around and shot orders to his men. "Take his broncs intuh town. Put 'em in the corral by the loadin' shed."

He turned back to the crippled man. "Yuh couldn't expect tuh get away with this forever, Dan. It's agin' the law. An' furthermore, Larry Elver had nothin' tuh do with my comin' out here."

McCall said fiercely: "If yuh're through, all of yuh git out! Elver, start for the door before I fill yuh with lead. And I don't like the way yuh look at my wife! Yuh always wanted her, didn't yuh? Well, yuh'll never get her. That's one thing yuh can't take from me, yuh yellow-livered coyotes! Get out, Elver—"

His wife held to the man's gun arm. "Please go—" she begged Larry Elver. "He—doesn't know what he's saying. Aren't you satisfied to smash him? Do you have to stay and gloat over a helpless man?" She seized the Colt herself, and threatened the men. "I'll give you three seconds."

Seldon spoke sternly: "Come on, Elver."

"I'm stayin'," Larry defied him grimly.

He stared June McCall down, daring her to fire. The sheriff took one look at him and turned to call his men.

"You don't know what yuh're sayin', either, June," the young rider addressed the girl. "Yuh know Seldon's right. Yuh've been handin' out help tuh badmen for a price, Dan McCall! Yuh might even have helped the skunk who put yuh in that chair! Drill Turrell!"

At that name June McCall dropped the Colt and uttered a sharp cry. The man confined to a wheel chair jerked as if his body had been struck by a gun slug. Larry Elver took a leaden ball from his pocket and flipped it into McCall's lap.

"Yuh ever see anythin' like that? Reckon yuh have, McCall."

The helpless ex-deputy of Solado stared at the thing with bulging eyes. As if mesmerized, he intoned: "Where'd yuh get that, Elver?"

"Out of my father's heart, McCall!"

"THE same—the same kind—that smashed me down," murmured Dan McCall. With slow movements, his fingers closed over the slug and tightened on it as if in an effort to crush it to bits. Then he looked up at Elver. "Reckon I might've done just that—what yuh said—Larry. Helped the skunk tuh get away. But nobody knows Turrell for sure. There's no way of knowin' him—"

"I have a way tuh tag him," Larry Elver shot out. "A sure-fire way. And he was in this house last night! He killed a woman in Solado not more than two hours ago, a woman who recognized that slug I flipped in front of an hombre's eyes. There was a story once about a pretty road actress —yuh've probably heard it. Turrell took her with him—"

McCall's voice was a whisper. "Yuh think that woman was—"

"Who else? Why did he gun her down just when she was goin' tuh tell me something? Yeah—Turrell was here awhile ago, the man who rode up into the timber. On a different

horse and wearing different clothes. Seems like it's all unreal, the way things happened. The man he crippled helpin' him tuh get away—"

Dan McCall lifted a hand wearily. "Don't rub it in, feller. Reckon I've been a fool. Sittin' here like I've been for six months, hungry tuh git on a horse, tuh do everythin' a man ought tuh be able tuh do, cussin' the world because I couldn't. It starts tuh blacken a man's soul. Reckon yuh blame me for askin' June tuh marry a half alive man, Larry, but I was afraid tuh be like this alone. I had tuh have someone—and I loved her. Yuh know that, don't yuh?"

The other nodded. "I know how yuh feel, Dan."

June's face was hidden in her hands as she knelt beside her husband's chair. Her sobs broke the deathly silence that hung in the room after Larry had spoken. Dan McCall looked long and hard at the man who had once been his rival. Then he bent his head and spoke to the girl.

"Reckon I want yuh tuh hear this, June," he said in a tight voice. It seemed an hour before he went on. His words were to change the patterns of three lives.

"Yuh've been wonderful, June," he said, "tuh stand by me like yuh have. But I knew all the time how yuh've been eatin' out yore heart for the man who rode away—Larry Elver."

"Please—Dan—it isn't so. Larry, tell him he's—"

There was a trace of wry humor on Dan McCall's face. "Don't ask him tuh lie, June. He loves yuh—like yuh love him. If this hadn't happened tuh me, yuh'd maybe changed yore mind about sayin' yuh'd be my wife. But it happened and yuh wouldn't let me down. There have been times when I've heard yuh cryin' when yuh thought I was asleep.

"Tate has told me how yuh ride almost every other night tuh that place over by yore father's ranch. Where you an' Larry used tuh meet. Was a time when it made me hate yuh, Larry—hate the world. But all of a sudden I've kind of changed."

"Dan," Larry cut in, "yuh're loco, clean loco! I'm driftin' away from here pronto."

June McCall said: "Yes—Larry, please go. Dan's wrong. I love him."

"Sometime yuh'll git punished for white lies like that," the crippled man said to her gently. "You wait an' see." He tried to laugh, but it was a pitiful attempt at levity. Larry Elver started for the door.

"Yuh won't see me again, Dan. Good luck tuh—"

"Come back, Larry," McCall husked. There was a vibrant terror in his voice. "Reckon I'm afraid of—somethin'— I've got a feelin' that somebody'll try tuh take June. Reckon I won't be able tuh do much. Yuh saw that hombre lookin' at her last night? She belongs tuh you, Larry Elver—and if yuh leave her helpless—"

Then it was that young Elver faced grim reality. He thought of Drill Turrell and his teeth seemed to freeze together. There was no question but that Dan McCall would give his life for her, but giving his life would not save her from Turrell.

"Reckon I'd better stay here awhile," he said grimly.

"I'm not afraid," declared the girl. "I want you to go, Larry. And don't ever—come back—again."

The words seemed to be wrenched from her. Her eyes held a starved expression that knifed young Elver through and through. On the point of going, he suddenly stiffened in his tracks. The crunch of boot heels in gravel, the almost inaudible jingle of spurs, indicated an alien presence outside. He crossed the room to McCall's chair as lithely as a cat.

"SOMEBODY'S comin'. If it's—Turrell, I'll call his hand. Watch close, Dan. June, get into the other room."

"I—hope—it's him," McCall ground

out. "Reckon it'll set a lot of things right." He swung his chair around so that the right side of it pointed toward the door. Larry crossed the floor swiftly and hid behind a curtain that covered a closet. The next few moments of waiting seemed a lifetime of suspended animation. At last a knock came at the door.

"Come in!" called the crippled man. His voice was like a clap of thunder in the stillness that precedes an electric storm.

The door swung inward and a tall man with an angular nose and a black, closely clipped mustache entered the room. His long, snaky fingers were near his guns. Beady eyes swept the interior of the hut.

"Evenin', McCall," he slurred. "Got a horse for me?"

"I've quit that," the man in the chair replied. "Sheriff cleaned me out tuhnight. Yuh better ride. This place ain't safe fer badmen any more. There's nothin' yuh can get here."

"Wrong," the man cracked. "Git her out before I blast yore brains out!"

"Yuh mean—my wife?" Dan McCall clipped. "Yuh wouldn't—"

"I'm leavin' this part of the country for a long time," the outlaw snarled. "I kinda like company—same as you, McCall. What yuh want with her? Yuh're a cripple. Yuh're—"

"Don't, Dan! He'll—" June McCall dashed out of the other room in a panic. "I'll—go—with—him." Her cheeks were as pale as death, and terror made her lips quiver. "Yuh won't—hurt—him—if I go with you, will you?" she spoke to the hard-faced bandit.

"Not if yuh come pronto," came the menacing reply. "Start movin'! There's a horse out behind the shed."

Larry Elver took a long breath, reached into his pocket for the leaden slug and tossed it out into the room. It hit close to the boot of the caller and clattered across the boards. The man's eyes stabbed toward it and a curse slipped through his tight lips. His features twisted into a grotesque mask, and he swung his head toward the curtained closet. Simultaneously his fingers moved.

Yelling to Dan McCall, Larry lunged into the room. He saw the green in the man's piercing eyes and shouted: "Drill Turrell!"

With the cry, his Colts appeared to leap into his fingers. But a six-gun roared before they cleared their holsters. The flame of it came from the right side of the crippled man's chair. Again it crashed and Turrell's body jerked violently.

He did not cave, but swung slowly without moving his feet, his guns crashing lead into his victim in the wheel chair. Blood spouted with every curse that poured from Turrell's lips.

"Don't die too quick, Turrell!" Larry Elver lashed out. "Look at me, Turrell! Yuh killed my father, Sheriff Elver. Kind of messed things up for yuh—that bullet I took out of his heart. Don't die yet, Drill Turrell! Look at the man who got yuh. In the chair there—where you put him!"

He drilled Turrell's already caving body with another bullet, and the man went down on his face, nerveless fingers releasing his guns. His hat fell off and rolled a few inches away from him.

June McCall's terror-stricken voice cut through the gunsmoke. She had her arms around the limp figure in the chair and was calling her husband's name frantically. Instantly Larry Elver was at her side, shoving his guns into their leather cases. Before he could speak, the girl melted to the floor in a shapeless, unconscious heap.

In the next second, a gloating curse spun the young rider around, and he struck for his holstered guns. The fleeting realization came that he was too late. Turrell, eyes glazing, was on his knees in a pool of his own blood, his gray hat held out in front of him.

"Yuh're goin' tuh hell with me—yuh skunk!"

LARRY ELVER faced the death that had blasted out his father's life. That hidden death that Drill Turrell had always carried. Dazedly he wondered why nothing struck him when a gun's crashing roar again filled the room. Not until he saw the gaping hole between the badman's snaky eyes did he realize that someone else had fired.

He thought it must have been June, but the girl lay where she had fallen, returning consciousness leaving her incapable of movement as her dilated eyes took in the scene. Larry's eyes were drawn to Dan McCall then. The crippled man was making a terrible effort to raise his head.

A smoking Colt fell from his fingers and clattered to the boards. In one great stride, Larry reached the wheel chair and gently raised Dan's head. The ashen face split into a grin.

"Tagged him—Larry. Saw him pick up that—hat— It fell an' it made a kind—of—thump. Third—gun—Larry— Dark in—here—ain't it? Wh-where's—J-June? Tell—her—light—a lamp."

The girl was rising with effort. She reached Dan's side.

"Shut—the door—Larry. Cold—in here," he whispered, letting his head drop against June's shoulder as she leaned over him.

He died that way. His last words were hard to get. Larry told June afterwards the gist of them. "Makes—things—right— Dead all over—Larry—June—take her—"

Larry Elver led the sobbing girl into the little lean-to bedroom. Then he returned to the other room, and lifted Dan McCall's shapeless body from the wheel chair to a cot at one side. Gently he wiped the blood from the dead man's mouth, and drew the blanket up over him. There was a smile on Dan's face as if he were satisfied with things at last.

"Death wasn't hard for him tuh take that way," Larry murmured under his breath. "Better so. Reckon no man with two good legs could have gone out in a greater blaze of glory. You had guts, Dan McCall!"

He turned toward the body of Drill Turrell, nudged it with his foot as if it had been a snake. Then he stooped and picked up the man's big hat. Inside the high crown, a holster had been rigged. In it had been cached a small, old-fashioned derringer with a short barrel. Larry took it out and examined it, lips tight.

"A man had tuh be a pretty low breed of rat tuh work that way." He slammed it onto the floor. "Reckon yuh'll rest pretty easy tuhnight, Dad. I figure there's some way of yuh knowin' about this."

He went to the door of the lean-to and called softly to June McCall. No answer except the sounds of her grief. He waited patiently. When the girl came out, her eyes were red, but her cheeks were the color of porcelain. Larry put a hand on her shoulder and gently turned her away from the sight of the shambles in the room.

"I'll take yuh home," he said.

NEITHER spoke on the long ride to the Parslow ranch. When Larry had placed the girl in the safety of her father's arms, he said: "She'll want a lot of understandin', Jim. I'm ridin' tuh Solado tuh see Sheriff Seldon."

"When yuh get through with what has tuh be done," Parslow said feelingly, "come back, Larry. I want yuh tuh work for me."

Out of respect for the memory of Dan McCall, June asked Larry to wait a year before he spoke his heart again. Time erased the tragedy from her face and her cheeks filled out, taking on their natural color once more. The old sparkle slowly returned to her eyes, and it was a great day on the Dreamy J when her old familiar laugh rang again.

At last came a day that Larry Elver had ringed with lead pencil on the calendar that hung in his room. It

was the anniversary of the day when he had agreed to meet June at the bend in the willow-flanked stream. That night he rode out to the spot and found the girl waiting for him. He did not speak when she came to meet him, simply gathered her into his arms and held her close.

"You know my answer, Larry," she murmured. "You knew what it would be—that time so long ago. I've never loved anyone else. I'll never belong to anyone but you. No—don't say anything. Just hold me tight. I've dreamed so much. I want to be sure I won't wake up from paradise this time."

The two heard the churn of horses' hoofs and reluctantly drew apart. A dozen riders closed in on them and formed a circle.

"Figgered this time we'd make sure yuh didn't run off, Larry," boomed a familiar voice. It was June's father.

Sheriff Seldon came over, and handed Larry a long envelope. "Weddin' present, feller," he explained, grinning. "Twenty-five hundred dollars!"

The horsemen rode off amidst a chorus of laughs and left the two alone once more.

"Must be some loco—tuh forgit he shot a skunk awhile back an' didn't collect the bounty," said Seldon. His companions grinned expansively. They knew how it was.

Next Month's

WESTERN ACES

GUN HAVOC IN COMANCHE

Gripping Range-feud Novel

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Thrill-packed "Preacher Devlin" Adventure

By L. L. FOREMAN

Stirring, Human-interest Novelette

By JOE ARCHIBALD

And Many Other Western Aces

On Sale One Month From Today

Powdersmoke Pledge

By JAMES CLYDE HARPER

Author of "The Bullet Bet," etc.

The law branded Jim Mason—the Tarantula. And fate seared his soul with a bitter mission. For men were destined to die to right an ancient wrong.

JIM MASON rode his big black around to the back door. He left the reins trailing, walked around to the front. He paused, loosened his right-hand Colt in the

holster. He wore two of them. Gray, hard, cold. As gray as his clothing, his horse. As hard as the bitter, cynical smile that was always on his lips. As cold as the light that lurked in his gray, straight, unwavering eyes. For a moment he stood there, tall, muscular, unmoving. Then, with easy, pantherish grace, he entered the saloon.

The late afternoon crowd was small. The barkeep was polishing glasses. A couple of men drank beer at this end of the bar. Four were playing a slow game of stud at a table. A fifth stood near them, watching. Tall, gaunt, weather-beaten. There was a star on his chest.

Jim Mason grinned faintly as he turned to the bartender. "Your boss around?"

"In there." The barkeep indicated a closed door at the far end of the bar.

Mason went to the door. There he paused a moment, unbuttoned his left shirt sleeve, rolled it up. Then he twisted the knob, entered.

A big man, seated behind a desk, looked up in quick surprise. He started to speak. But his stare centered on Mason's bared left arm, up near the point of the shoulder. His mouth dropped open, and the thick cigar fell from his lips.

"Remember me, huh?" Mason said, coldly. "All right, Black. You know why I'm here. Make your play."

The saloon owner leaped to his feet, kicked over his chair. His right hand darted up for the hide-out he wore. Fingers closed over the six-gun butt. But stayed there. For a slug from Mason's gun blasted into his brain. The saloon man swayed, pitched face down across the desk.

There were surprised exclamations within the saloon. Then the office door was jerked open. Men crowded around, Sheriff Ed Barnes in front. He stared a moment, his gaze on the stranger's bared left arm. Then, with a startled grunt, he went for his gun.

"The Tarantula!"

Jim Mason leaped across the room, hand slashing out. His gun clipped the sheriff's head. Barnes fell back, stunned. Mason slammed shut the door, darted out the back.

The sheriff kicked open the door, ran across the room. The crowd trailed him. Three had guns. But Jim Mason was already mounted, a hundred yards away, racing for the hills north of town.

Sheriff Barnes fired two futile shots, spun around. "Git mounted. That's the Tarantula. I saw the tattoo on his arm. Move, you hombres."

Jim Mason, worth two thousand dead or alive, had less than a mile start when twenty riders swung out in pursuit.

For hours he eluded the posse. Darkness came. Midnight passed. Mason believed the pursuers had given up until daylight. He sought a place to spend the rest of the night.

The big gray shied suddenly as they rode into a small clearing. Mason's hand dived to weapons. But it was not a member of the posse. It was a child, a curly, tousled-haired little girl of four or five. She was asleep on the ground.

MASON dismounted, tried to arouse her. She whimpered but did not awaken. Hers was the sleep of an exhausted, lost little tot. Mason took her up, mounted, and started to look for her home.

For an hour they rode, the little girl cradled in the crook of his left arm. His right hand hovered warily near a gun. Mason didn't want to be caught, yet. But they came out of the hills without interference.

Across the mesa, a light blinked. Mason rode to the house. His first step on the porch drew instant attention. Some one hurried to the door, threw it open.

A young, slender woman looked out questioningly, focusing her eyes to the gloom. Her hair was disheveled, her eyes red. Then she saw the child he held.

"Vergie!" With a choked little cry, she took the child, hugged it to her, laughing and crying at the same time. Mason removed his hat, shuffled awkwardly.

The woman wiped the tears from her face, attempted to straighten her hair. "You must think me silly acting like this. But Vergie has been missing since noon. Some way she managed to slip away. I can't tell you how much I thank you, stranger. But I do, a lot."

"Don't try, ma'am. Good night."

"Oh, no. You must let me fix you a cup of coffee, some food. I have everything ready. Prepared it for the boys who are out looking for Vergie. They were looking for a murderer—" Abruptly she stopped, bit her lip. She had realized the significance of a stranger being abroad in the valley at this time of night. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't try to apologize, ma'am," said Jim Mason. "I'm the Tarantula, called that because of a tattoo I had put on when I was a kid. Since you know me now, I reckon I'd better go."

She was silent a moment. Then she smiled. A friendly, warm smile that caused a strange sensation within Jim Mason.

"I don't care what the law thinks about you. No man could be real bad who'd stop making his own escape to bring a lost child out of the hills." She went to the couch, laid the little girl down. "You may as well come in. If you've been chased all night, you haven't had supper and are bound to be hungry. Leave the door open. If we hear anyone coming, you can slip out the back door. Come on in and sit down. I'll only be a minute."

And without waiting to see that he entered, she went into the kitchen. Mason stood there a moment, scanning the moon-lighted valley. The aroma of coffee, of warm bread and fried ham sifted from the kitchen. Abruptly Jim Mason stepped inside, pushed the door partly shut.

She brought plates of hot meat and bread, a jar of preserves, butter. She went back and returned with two cups of coffee. She explained they could hear better from the front room if anyone should come. She drew up chairs to the center table.

They didn't talk as they ate. But Jim Mason was thinking a lot. He tried to bend his eyes to the food before him. But they strayed back to her. She had combed her hair, removed tear stains while preparing the food. She was a gay, smiling, companionable young woman.

Once, as she took his cup to refill it, her fingers brushed along his. It sent an electric tenseness through Jim, made the blood flood his face and neck. He glanced up swiftly, hoping she had not noted. But she was looking at him, a startled expression on her face. Hastily she dropped her gaze, hurried for the coffee.

Jim sat there and silently cursed himself for feeling that way over a woman, whose husband was now probably out with the others searching for the child. He started to get up and leave. But before he could move, she was returning with the coffee.

He drank it quickly, eyes studiously averted, and then stood.

"If you ride east you can make it," she said. "They're searching west and north of here, toward the border."

"Thanks, ma'am, but I'm not going to try and get away. I'm hunting another man to—er—see. I understand he's somewhere near the border in this section."

The gaiety left her smile and she sobered. "Must you?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so, ma'am."

"Then—good luck, stranger."

"Thanks, ma'am," said Jim, picking up his hat. "The name is Jim Mason. Kind of late introducing myself."

"I'm glad to know, you, Jim," she said, holding out her hand and again giving him that friendly smile. "I'm Mary Douglas. Once more I'll say good luck and be careful—Jim."

Her small, firm hand gripped his, burned his palm. Jim Mason dropped it, left. He did not say good-bye, merely nodded. He could say nothing. Not that he didn't want to. But the things he wanted to say must remain unsaid.

For he was a man wanted by the law, perhaps riding to his death in those western hills. A man like that had no business thinking of love.

IF Charlie ever had another name, men didn't know it. For that matter, men didn't know much at all about this big, one-eyed, thick-bodied man who had, for years, run a borderland place out there in the hills.

But there were many things told of him. Some said he lost that eye in a fight ten years ago. They said it had been fair and square, as Charlie was trying the same trick, but had been beaten to it. That night he had lost both fight and his eye. They told that two days later the man who won was found dead, his head almost severed. But men whispered softly when they talked of that fight and the loss of that eye. For Charlie killed men who called him "One-Eye."

Two days ago a man died for saying that name. The man had been a stranger, riding for the border.

"What do you want, hombre?" Charlie was always suspicious of strangers who came from the north.

"A drink of likker, One-Eye," replied the man, starting up the steps.

Charlie's vein-splattered face had gone red, then purple. He rasped an oath.

"Dam' you, hombre! No man calls me that and lives. Speak your apology."

The stranger had spent forty hours in the saddle. Back north there had been an attempted robbery, a fight. A sheriff had died. The stranger had narrowly escaped. He was tired, saddle-weary, eyes red from lack of rest, nerves at the snapping point from the hard pace to reach the border.

"One-Eye," he sneered up into Charlie's big face, "try makin' me."

Charlie's hands moved in twin blurs. His left clasped at the front of his trousers, to the left of the thick belt buckle. His right, spread wide, quivered before the opened bottom of his shirt. A knife leaped out, released from a spring holster, met his clutching fingers. Then his hand flicked toward the man on the steps.

It had been a blur of motion. The stranger went for his gun the instant Charlie's hands moved. He had been fast, back north. Fast enough to shoot himself out of a corner. But he was not fast enough this time. His gun cleared leather. Then he was staggering backward, clutching at his throat. He tripped over his own spurs, fell heavily. His legs twitched. His hands clawed the gravel. Then he lay still, sightless eyes staring upward.

Charlie came off the porch, pulled his knife, wiped the bloody blade on the dead man's neckerchief. He ripped away the stranger's shirt, inspected his left shoulder. He gave a satisfied grunt, called a command to Butch and Jernigan who stood in the doorway, their faces expressionless.

They rolled the dead man in a sheet. That night they took the body up into the hills back of the place and dug a grave. There were four graves close to it. They, too, were nameless piles of stone that Butch and Jernigan had rounded over.

That had been two days ago. To-

day, Charlie was sitting in his big chair, right fingers resting near the opening of his shirt. His eyes were on the north trail that crossed the small creek ninety feet in front of his place. Charlie was expecting a man.

Only an hour ago Butch had returned. Night before last Butch had gone into town. Every two weeks, either Butch or Jernigan rode in. Although he never went in himself, Charlie didn't mind their going. It kept him in touch with things.

Today, Charlie had been angry at first that Butch had remained away two nights and one whole day. Their usual time was one night and part of the next day. But Charlie hadn't been angry when Butch told what happened in town. There had been a killing. Butch had ridden with the posse. Fred Black, the saloon man, had been killed by a hombre they called the Tarantula. Called that, Butch said, because of a tattoo on his left shoulder.

No, they hadn't caught the man, Butch answered. The posse had stopped searching for him and started looking for a kid that had strayed off into the hills. Butch had left the posse then, and come on back.

After Butch finished, he went inside with Jernigan. They wanted Charlie to come in to play blackjack. He refused. He sat there in his big chair on the high porch, thinking of the man who had been killed. Fred Black had been a friend of Charlie's. Killed by a man who had a tarantula tattooed on his left shoulder.

And as he thought of that, Charlie's thick right fingers slid into his shirt and caressed the hilt of the needle-pointed knife.

HE was still sitting that way when Jim Mason arrived. Mason halted his big gray in the small creek, let the horse drink. He built a leisurely cigarette. As he licked the paper, he studied the big man across the creek.

He noted the thick, powerful shoulders, the fleshy, vein-splattered face. One of the hands was near the unbuttoned bottom part of his shirt. Jim Mason smiled thinly, applied a match to his cigarette. Then he rode across the creek.

Charlie got up, came to the top of the steps.

"What you want, hombre?"

Mason tossed aside the cigarette, dismounted. "I wonder," he said softly, "if you remember me?"

Charlie's good eye narrowed. His right hand twitched slightly. "Am I supposed to?"

Mason started up the steps. Charlie moved slightly aside. Butch and Jernigan came to the door. Mason gave them a brief glance. Butch, heavy-browed, bullet-headed. Jernigan, skinny, sandy-haired, tall. Wearing guns, waiting for a mere suggestion from their one-eyed boss. Vicious, deadly, emotionless killers.

There was a grin on Mason's lips. But there was no mirth in his eyes. They were alert, cold.

"It might help you if I pulled off my shirt," he said in a low, grim voice. "That's the way you saw me last, one night three years ago. Remember? Four men bought fresh horses from me. One of their saddlebags busted when they were changing saddles, spilled a lot of money. I savvied at once. A bank had been robbed two days before, a man killed. They didn't want me to talk. They started to kill me then. But they didn't. Two hours later, they changed their minds, come back an' set fire to my house. I wasn't in it. I had gone to tell the sheriff. But my mother was in it.

"She died that night, trapped, burned to death. And when she did, them four skunks signed their lives to me. Three of them are dead. You're the fourth, One-Eye. I know about that knife close to your fat belly. Snap for it, an' then meet your skunk friends in hell!"

Big Charlie's face was purple. His one eye glittered with all the venom a man could possess. His lips writhed across his broken, stained teeth, and he laughed. The sound was harsh, malignant.

"Others have tried to nail up my hide, hombre. I'm still livin'." Charlie gave a slight nod. Butch and Jernigan separated, bent at the waist, gun hands taloned. Charlie grinned.

"Three years ago you was lucky, Mason. I meant to stop you from puttin' the sheriff on our trail. I struck the match to the greasewood we piled beside yore shack, hombre. We didn't get you. But it's all right with me. You're worth more now than you were then. There's two thousand dollars on your head. I'll collect that, Mason, after you're dead."

Jim Mason, once owner of a little horse ranch up in Wyoming, suddenly trembled. For three years he had hunted. Now, this thick-bodied, one-eyed killer brazenly said he had started the fire that devoured his crippled mother.

"You—" Mason's voice choked. He went for his gun.

Instantly three other hands sped for weapons. But neither reached its mark.

For a gun volcanoed behind them. Lead ripping into the plank flooring between their feet. The four wheeled. Sheriff Ed Barnes stood in the doorway. There was a leveled six-gun in each hand.

"Up, damn you. All four of you. Grab high!"

IT would be suicide to disobey. Four pairs of hands went shoulder high. Big Charlie laughed affably.

"They ain't no use of us keeping our hands up. That's the hombre you want. Two thousand on his head, an' he killed another man yesterday."

Charlie lowered his hands an inch. But he instantly raised them again as one of the sheriff's guns was centered on him.

"You're all wanted. Don't you lower them hands again, you fat-bellied skunk. I've been a long time gettin' anything on you, hombre. But I've got it now. Your hired hands failed to clean their pick and shovel, Charlie."

"What do you mean?" demanded the other quickly.

Sheriff Barnes laughed grimly. "Me and some boys was searching the hills last night for little Vergie Douglas, feller. About daybreak, one of the boys found a new grave. He come to me. I sent him to Tom's place for tools to open it. He told me Vergie had been found, when he returned. I sent him to get the other boys, and opened the grave.

"I dug up a man. His head was nearly cut off. A knife had done that. I had a hunch. I slipped up on your place from the back, searched them sheds back there. In one of them was a pick and shovel. That's red clay where I found the grave. Red clay was still on your pick and shovel."

"What about it?" snapped Charlie. "Sure, I killed him. Butch and Jernigan buried him. It was self-defense. He tried to draw his gun. Butch and Jernigan will tell you that."

The two gunmen nodded quickly. But Sheriff Barnes ignored them.

"That hombre's death don't bother me. He had it coming. He killed a sheriff up in Arizona last week. But the way he died interests me a lot. I'm glad you said you done it, feller. Nearly a year ago Tom Douglas was found with his head almost cut off in the same way, an' the five thousand he sold his beef for up in Arizona was gone. Charlie, I'm arresting you and your men for the murder of Tom Douglas an' the theft of that money. Strip off your hardware."

For an instant Charlie was

stunned. Then he began cursing Butch and Jernigan for failing to clean the grave digging tools. He caught his breath, and started on the sheriff.

Ed Barnes took a forward step. His eyes were narrow, his lips thin.

"Another word out of you and I'll ram them oaths down your throat with hot lead. I said strip your hardware."

Charlie's mouth hung open a second. He glanced aside at his two henchmen, who fumbled with the buckles of their gun belts. Then Charlie laughed. A high-pitched sound that was more the snarl of an animal than a human laugh.

"Go to hell, sheriff!"

Charlie leaped backward, disappeared over the edge of the porch. With him went Butch and Jernigan. They had understood the meaning of his side glance.

And as the three disappeared, their hands were racing for weapons. Sheriff Barnes fired twice. One shot caught Butch in the arm. The other bounced Jernigan's hat from his head. Then they were below the level of the porch, and bullets were ripping up through the plank flooring.

SHERIFF BARNES retreated within the big single room of the place, one of his guns on Mason. He gave a command. Mason hesitated, then unbuckled his weapons.

"This is the first time in three years these guns have been off me," he said, passing them over. "They've killed three men. Each needed it. There's a fourth. That one-eyed polecat outside. I'd like to keep them long enough to walk out there, sheriff."

Barnes snapped a quick shot at a head thrust above the edge of the porch, missed, grunted.

"I've heard some of your story, Jim Mason. I can't say I blame you for them killings. That hombre you plugged yesterday was a trouble maker. I'm not sorry he's dead. But you can't do them things, Jim. It's ag'in' the law. I'm sorry, Jim, but you're my prisoner."

Barnes took Mason's guns, emptied them. Then he filled the empty chambers of his own Colts from the belts around his waist.

"Get you a chair an' sit down, Jim. Get over there in the corner. The log walls of this place are thick. Bullets won't find you over there. This may be a long fight."

Ed Barnes placed his cartridges in a handy pile, took off his hat. He peeked cautiously around the door facing, fired quickly. At the end of the porch, Butch ducked down, cursing at the wood splinters that showered in his face.

"Missed him again," said Barnes ruefully.

The sheriff laid aside one of his guns, fumbled in a shirt pocket. He evidently failed to find what he sought, for he dug into his other pockets. A nettled frown came on his brow. He addressed Mason.

"Got the makings? Seem to have lost mine. Back at that grave, I reckon."

Mason pulled a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket. Something got tangled in the strings, fell to the floor as he tossed it over. Sheriff Barnes picked up the object, started to toss it back. But he stopped, stared hard at it.

"Where'd you get this?"

Mason bent forward, frowned. Ed Barnes held a tiny gold locket on a thin chain.

"Didn't know I had it," said Mason. "Why'd you ask?"

"It belongs to Vergie Douglas. I give it to her two years ago when she was three. You know something about it or you wouldn't have it."

"I reckon," said Jim slowly, "it must have fell in my pocket last night."

For a moment, old Ed Barnes was silent. His keen eyes were on Mason.

Then the sheriff reached behind. He picked up Mason's guns, filled the emptied chambers. He placed them back in leather, held them to Mason.

"I reckon I savvy, son," said Ed Barnes. "The boy who brought them diggin' tools said Mary acted plumb queer about Vergie's return. Trying to cover you up, I guess. An' I'm glad she did. Mason, put on them guns. It took guts to turn back from escaping and chance running into my posse. I may have to crack your neck with a noose after a jury gets through with you, if we get out of this, but even if you're a killer, you're a man, an' I'd like to shake hands with you."

Mason's hand was taken in a grip of iron. And then, walking back to his post, the sheriff carelessly exposed himself for an instant to anyone standing directly in front outside. Instantly a gun roared. The sheriff stiffened, pitched to the floor. Butch's voice was raised in gleeful laughter.

"I got 'im. The sheriff is down. Now let's git that Tarantula."

JIM MASON leaped to the sheriff, pulled him aside.

"Hit bad, sheriff?"

Barnes shook his head. "Naw. In the right leg. Goes to show the older a man gets the less he thinks. I'd plumb forgot them hombres out there. Reckon it's a good thing I did give your guns back. You might need 'em for sure now."

Mason ripped the sheriff's trouser with his knife. The wound was not serious. Mason wrapped his neckerchief around it, stopped the bleeding. Barnes muttered his thanks, tried to stand. The leg would not permit it. The sheriff sat down, grinned up at Mason.

"Guess this is one time a prisoner will have to carry the sheriff to jail. You'll have to hold 'em off, Jim. At least until dark. You might be able to ease out then an' get our broncs.

"Of course," the sheriff hesitated, then went on, "you might decide to go without me. I reckon if you do, then they's nothing I can do, since you're the boss, now."

Jim Mason looked outside. There was a twisted, thin smile on his lips.

"I'll stick, sheriff. I'll see it through all the way. Especially this part of it. My mother was paralyzed from the waist down. I had to carry her around from place to place. I wake up nights in a cold sweat, thinking of the hell she must have gone through those last minutes. I swore to even up if it was the last thing I did. Nothing is going to stop me."

"I'm not blamin' you, son. I'd feel the same way. But you can't do those things. It's against the law. Maybe if you got a job, settled down, you could forget. Work does a lot for a man, Jim."

Jim Mason laughed softly. "You're forgetting I'm a wanted man. Two thousand dollars' worth. Put on my head because I killed two of them murdering skunks. They'll probably put another thousand on my head for the man I killed last night."

"They won't, Jim," said Barnes quietly. "I'll see to that."

Jim Mason was silent, stroking the guns at his sides. For a moment, his stare was in the distance.

"Sure I'd like to settle down. I talked to her last night. She held my hand, wished me luck. It struck me like lightning. I'll never feel that way about another woman. But I'll never tell her what I have been thinking. I'd never be able to replace her dead husband, and Vergie's dad. She's the kind of woman who loves only once. No, sheriff. It's no go. The law says I'm a killer You're the law. I'm in your hands after this is over."

Sheriff Barnes started to say something. But before he could speak, Mason was again talking. Addressing those outside.

"One-Eye, this is Jim Mason

speaking. I'm coming out for you. Try to stop me."

There was a surprised murmuring from beneath the edge of the porch. Jim Mason loosened his guns in leather, strode for the door.

"You dam' young fool!" Ed Barnes attempted to grab the man with the tattoo on his left shoulder. "They'll bushwhack you from all sides. Don't go out there like that."

But Mason eluded the sheriff's grasp, marched through the door.

"Stand up, you one-eyed skunk. I'm here."

FROM either end of the porch a head lifted. Guns lanced flame and smashing death. Mason staggered as bullets ripped into his legs, burned his body in white-hot streaks. He fought to keep his feet. But his knees buckled, bent.

Butch yelled an oath, emptied his gun. Still Mason stood, drawing, leveling his Colts. Jernigan was frantically thumbing the hammer of his gun.

"Ain't he goin' tuh die?" he shouted.

That was the last sound Jernigan made. For Mason had swung his two big Colts. A slug from the right one took Jernigan in the mouth, passed through his head. Jernigan fell as if polled with an axe.

At the other end of the porch, Butch attempted to feed more cartridges into his gun. Mason's left Colt swung. Butch tried to dive below the porch. But the top of his head was up too long. A slug caught him center between the eyes.

Mason swept the rim of the high porch with a swift glance. Somewhere below was Charlie. Charlie, the man who threw a knife that almost severed men's heads. Mason tried to walk to the steps. The effort was too much. He fell to his knees and hands. One gun slipped from his fingers. Blood was pumping from his body in a dozen places. Jim shook his head, crawled for the steps.

And then the third man leaped into view. Charlie, his face screwed into a hellish mask of hate, his one eye possessed of all the beady glitter of a striking rattlesnake. His hands were darting for the opening in his shirt.

"Dam' yuh, Mason—"

Charlie's hands came away. Rays of the sun glinted off cold, polished steel. It became a silvery streak. It was coming. Desperately Jim jerked his head aside, but not enough. The knife dug into Jim's shoulder with sickening, nauseating impact.

But the gun in Jim's right hand spoke. Charlie shrieked an inhuman scream, clutched at his head. He sprawled face up on the steps, jerking. Then he lay still. His one eye was now gone. Blood oozed from the empty socket.

The second Colt fell from Mason's limp hand. He sighed, sank down on his face. His eyes closed, wearily.

Sheriff Barnes crawled to him, shook him. Mason roused slightly. Barnes pulled the knife from Jim's shoulder, bandaged the wound with strips of his own shirt.

"Came dang close to your jugular, but I've seen men worse off git well. Think you can stand a little more pain?"

"A little or a lot, it don't matter now," said Jim.

"The hell it don't." The sheriff cut away Mason's left shirt sleeve. "Hold tight, now."

Barnes placed the keen knife blade on Mason's shoulder, pulled hard and quick. There was a quick hot numbness in the shoulder. Then the sheriff hastily wrapped shirt strips around it. He tied a knot, stabbed a finger at the floor. Mason saw a piece of bloody skin. His skin.

"The tattoo mark," said Barnes. "Jim, the Tarantula is dead. I was the only man who got a good look at yore face yesterday in Black's sa-

loon. Savvy? Me an' Mary, last night. I'm bettin' she won't talk. She's—ah, I thought so."

From across the creek came a hail. Mason looked up. Riders were approaching. Men and one woman. Mary Douglas.

Sheriff Barnes bent his head, spoke swiftly. "I told the feller who brung them grave openin' tools to foller me here with the others. You said somethin' about holdin' her hand last night. Jim, Mary wasn't Tom's wife. She is his sister, come to raise Vergie. Tom's wife died when little Vergie was born. You understand, son?"

Mary Douglas was coming up the steps. She knelt beside Jim. He looked up into her eyes, tried to speak a question. The words would not come. But Mary was looking at him. She was a woman. She read the question in his eyes. She laid a cool, comforting hand on his hot, weary brow. She smiled at him. And her smile was the answer to everything of importance to Jim Mason.

He looked at the sheriff and smiled. It was not a cold, hard, cynical smile now. It was the smile of a man who has found his future, and the one woman in the world to share it with him.

"Yeah, sheriff," he said, taking Mary's hand. "I savvy. Everything's gonna be fine, from now on."

If you like salty cowboy action stories, and gun-thundering yarns of the owl-hoot—you'll like

WESTERN TRAILS

You'll meet a young maverick who gets tired of being kicked around by life—and who "borrows" the name of a notorious gunhawk—

KID THUNDERBOLT
GRIPPING "JINGLE" NOVELET
By Frederick C. Davis

And you'll ride with the Three of the Wild to the—

BOOT-HILL CARNIVAL
GREAT "BERT LITTLE" NOVELET
By Clyde A. Warden

And you'll watch a man come back from the grave while—

DESTINY RIDES the LOBO PASS
SMASHING ACTION NOVELET
By Peter Germane

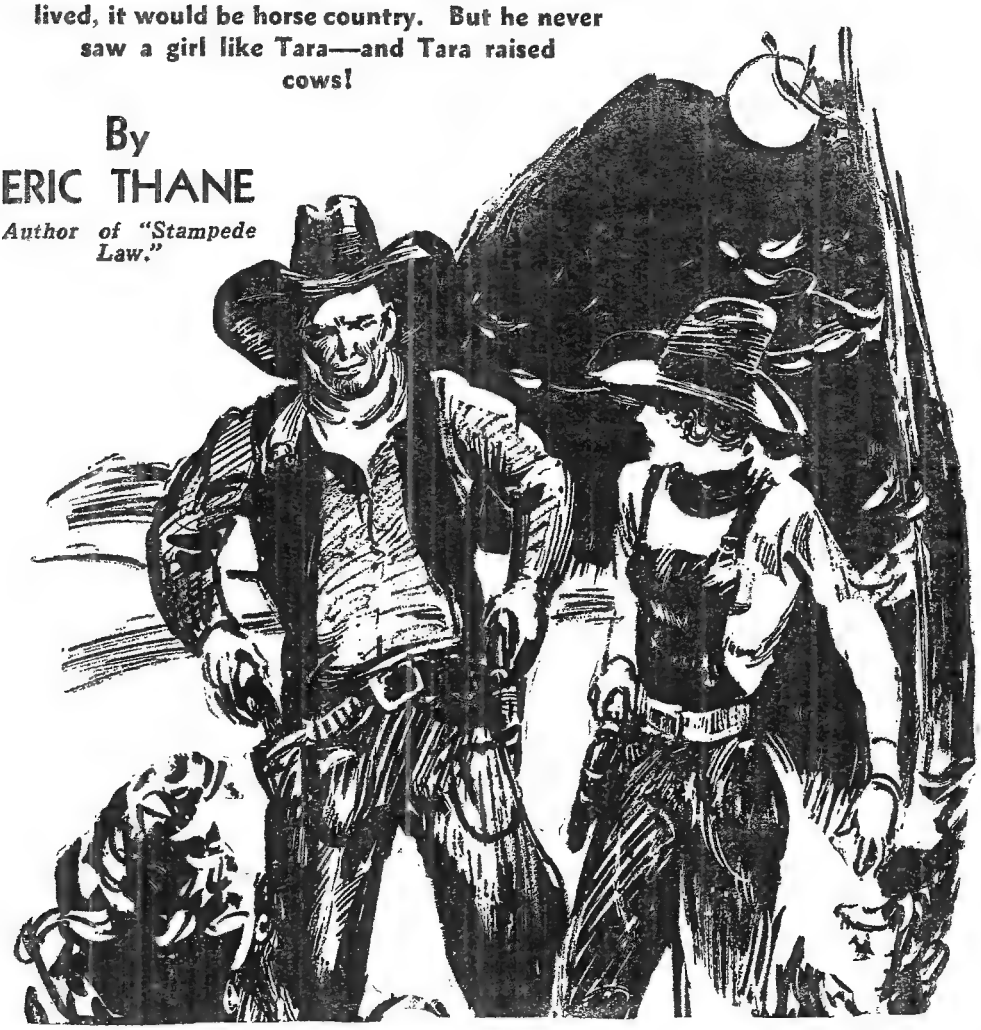
Also tophand stories by **L. P. Holmes, Phil Richards** and others.

June WESTERN TRAILS **Try It!**

Hell in Horse Heaven

This was horse country. And as long as Terreton lived, it would be horse country. But he never saw a girl like Tara—and Tara raised cows!

By
ERIC THANE
Author of "Stampede Law."



"THEY call this country the Horse Heaven!" the tall young man said, in a voice that drawled lazily, but nevertheless hinted of stubborn mettle beneath. "An' I don't aim to make it a cow hell! Get your herd back where it came from!"

The thickset rider removed his cigar and spat casually, almost disinterestedly, though his eyes were wary.

"Yo're hoggin' government range!" he remarked. "Jest as yore dad before you did! Ain't no reason why cows can't graze these hills!"

"Mebby not. But this is horse country, always has been horse country, an' as far as I'm concerned, there's a permanent 'No Trespassing' sign here for dogies!"

"Yo're the hombre they call 'Malheur' Terreton, ain't you?" the thick-

set man said. "They say all you men from Oregon are jest plain stubborn. An' I reckon there's jest one way to handle stubborn hombres! Logdell! Nolm! Come here!"

"Shore, Messner!" the individual designated as Logdell answered, and with his partner, Nolm, rode forward to flank his boss. Hard-faced men, these two—as hard-faced as Messner. They differed only in size, Messner being a big man whereas his pair of riders were thin, shifty-moving, gopher-mouthed punchers. Something more than punchers, Terreton divined from experience. Killers! Their whole beings emanated the personality of the desperado so definitely that Malheur Terreton felt ice creep up his spine.

"Boys, this hombre says we can't graze our cows on this range!" Messner said, his thick lips set in a smile without humor. "What you two got to say about thet?"

"We ain't talkin'!" Lodgdell returned. His hand dropped to his gun.

This was open war, and Terreton was not afraid. His father, the original "Malheur," who had come north from Oregon to establish his horse ranch here beyond the Columbia, had died fighting and unafraid, and in his son burned his spirit.

Terreton's hand dropped. His mind flashed swiftly, perplexed by one fact: These men were drawing slowly, almost as if they wanted him to lift his gun first. And that was not in their nature, if he knew the natures of men like these. Then a shadow flitted behind him. Only a man drawing with the utmost composure would have noticed.

But Terreton did. His lithe, compact body twisted viciously toward the rear and his gun flared. A dozen feet behind him a Mexican, one he'd noticed as driving the herd, collapsed, a bullet through his heart. A knife had already left his hand. Terreton ducked the flash of speeding metal, but at that the keen blade sliced through the sleeve of his fringed leather shirt.

"All right!" he snapped, before the trio regained their poise. "Slam them guns back! An' quick!"

Logdell and Nolm relaxed their grip; Messner chewed the butt of his cigar without visible emotion, though fear flashed into the eyes of his two partners.

"You yellow coyotes!" Terreton said in red wrath. "So that's the way you fight! You won't shoot it out face to face, but you plant a killer behind my back! Well, I got you three sized up! An' I'm more set than ever that this herd trails back the way it came! Now! Savvy that? Right now!"

"Terreton, we ain't started to fight!" Messner returned. "Yo're in fer it—"

A horseman from the rear of the herd came pounding up. A kid, Terreton thought. A smooth-faced, clear-featured kid, slight of build, black-eyed but with blond hair straggling from under the Stetson.

"What's this, Messner? What's happened?"

Terreton shook with surprise. A girl! He wondered now why, for the instant, he could have mistaken her for a boy. Her femininity was evident enough, in spite of the man's costume of jeans, khaki shirt, worn boots, and big bandanna around her throat.

"Messner, I told you I wanted no killing! And as long as I'm boss of this outfit, and you're my foreman, I'll have no killing! I thought you understood that when we started on this drive!"

"Shore, Tara!" Messner returned. "But I told you we was due fer trouble when you aimed to graze in this country! I told yuh Malheur Terreton'd move all hell to keep us out!"

The girl looked squarely at Terreton, and he shifted uneasily, as he did under the gaze of all women. And not because of any natural embarrassment, but because there was in him an

undying distrust, almost a hatred, for them all, young and old alike. A woman—not his mother, who had died at his birth—had given his father a raw deal down in the Malheur country, and because of her the elder Terreton had left that land. In the new country, he'd had to fight to exist. He had died fighting.

The tall young woman, who shifted uneasily under the gaze of the girl called Tara, had loved his father. Slowly, but definitely, his mind had fixed the cause of his father's death upon that woman in Oregon. But for her, the elder Terreton would have remained on home ground, would have prospered, would be living yet. Thus reasoned the son. And because of that one incident, he condemned all womanhood. But this woman's eyes were disturbing; they seemed to burn through him, and his pulses speeded strangely. But when he spoke, his slow voice revealed nothing of the storm within him.

"I killed the Mex, ma'am! Yore boys tried to snake-in-the-grass me, an' I had to kill him to protect myself! You said just now you were the owner of this outfit. That so?"

"Yes. I'm Tara Rothas!"

Terreton's lips were grim. "This is my country, Miss Rothas," he said, slowly, "an' you'll have to get your cattle off it! I don't allow no cows here on my horse range—not even a woman's herd!"

He saw Tara start. There had been a slight sneer in his last words. The girl bit her red lips, and color flared into her smooth, brown cheeks.

"They told me you were hogging this range!" she snapped, in anger. "This is government range, you know, and we've as much right to it as you have! Our range down south along the Columbia is burned up, but there's plenty of grass here in the hills. And I'm going to graze it!"

Terreton's hand dipped, and came up with gun clutched tightly in a palm that was perspiring.

"Jest as I told your foreman a minute ago, Miss Rothas! Get goin'! Right now! I had to kill one man, an' I'd hate to kill another!"

His threat had an effect, he saw. Tara's cheeks drained of color, and fear flashed into her eyes. But not fear of him, he divined; dread of something else. Her next faltered words, from which every trace of anger had vanished, enlightened him.

"But our range down along the Columbia is all burned up, Terreton! I—I can't go back there! My cattle would die! I—I'm hard-pressed by creditors, and I must fatten the cattle as soon as I can for sale! The grass in this country can do that!"

Before a man's plea, Terreton would have been adamant, but the tears that glossed Tara Rothas' black eyes shook the Horse Heaven master's stubbornness. He wavered. Evidently the girl saw this, for with a graceful movement she slipped out of the saddle and came very close to him. Whereupon his pulses, already pounding, raced still faster.

"Terreton, I—I haven't any other choice. Don't you see?"

"We can fight fer it!" Messner said.

"No! Not that! You keep out of this, Messner. Your blundering has caused the death of one man already!"

"Thet was self-protection!" Terreton pointed out.

"I know. Oh, I'm not blaming you!" Tara cried. "But can't you see? I must have grass—the grass you have! Can't you see that I deserve it, as much as you? This is government range. I have a right to it. Up to now you've kept everybody from it—"

"—because it's horse country, an' because possession is ten points of the law up here!" Terreton returned grimly.

But he was wavering still more. Under the urgent plea of misty eyes, the prejudice and stubbornness of years was being swept away. Truly enough, she had as much right to Horse Heaven as he—in spite of the

fact that she was a woman. But then, there might be some good in some women. In Tara Rothas. She was soft, feminine. Not hard and ruthless, as he had forced himself to consider all women.

"Terreton, let me graze my cattle here until they're fattened. Then I'll go away and never come back! Your horses won't miss the grass!"

She was close to Terreton now, pressing almost against him in the eagerness of what she asked. Then he surrendered—as he'd never done to a man. He swept his left arm southward, to a fringe of willows.

"There's a river there, Miss Rothas. It flows into the Columbia valley quite a spell south of here. Well, Miss Rothas, I'll make yuh a proposition! I don't want my horses grazing over cow-eaten range. The grass ain't so good any more. But you keep yore herd south of thet river an' I'll not molest you. Plenty of grass there. An' I'll draw all my horses north. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

"Terreton, that's a deal! I'll keep to my side of the water. I can promise you that!"

"Remember!" Terreton threatened. "You're stickin' to that promise! The minute them cows stray across over onto my horse range, there'll be trouble!"

His stubbornness was speaking out now, he knew—his hatred towards having given up a principle which had guided his life for over twenty years. But there was reward enough in the relief in Tara's eyes, in the flash of them when the tears dried. Suddenly her arms curved up, and Terreton felt them soft and warm and thrilling about his neck. Then his head was pulled down. It was instinct to resist, but the pressure was not to be denied, and his lips came almost level with the girl's red mouth.

For a brief instant it pressed fiercely against his. Then Tara jerked away, her cheeks flaming, and ran for her horse.

"We'll get the herd south of the river!" she said, her eyes avoiding his.

Beyond her, Messner chewed reflectively upon the butt of his cigar; the gopher-mouthed Nolm lounged carelessly in his saddle, and Logdell rolled himself a cigarette. They grunted at Tara's orders; leisurely they set out to execute them. There was a lack of interest in all their actions. On the surface, anyway. But underneath . . . Terreton was not deceived. He sensed vengeance, desperation, death.

"I'll send someone back to bury that Mexican!" Tara called. Her eyes avoided the stiff figure. Terreton surmised that she was unused to death.

But how had she come to have such riders as Messner, Logdell and Nolm in her outfit? She was scarcely safe with them — with any men of that kind. But Terreton's mind did not linger for long upon the question; memory of that kiss swept everything aside, and he rode in a daze back to the ranch. There, until time to turn in, he described and redescribed the charms of Tara Rothas to Tick, the little, misshapen man who acted as cook and roustabout when all of Terreton's riders were out on the range, as they were tonight.

Tick was sympathetic, but frank. "Wal, boss," he opined, his wide mouth twisted in a grin, "I reckon you've got over yore dislike fer women! I reckon yo're in love at last!"

TERRETON was a heavy sleeper, and it took the boom of six-guns to awaken him. But once torn from unconsciousness, he gained his faculties instantly. The echoes of shots still dinned through the bunkhouse. Terreton, in swift alarm, dragged on his boots and trousers, slipped into his shirt and with gun in hand went out into the bright moonlight.

The wind was from the south, and it carried a thunderous undertone

which Terreton instantly recognized as the sound of a herd on the move.

"Tick!" he called loudly, searching in the direction of the ranchhouse where the twisted man slept.

"Comin', boss!"

The little man hobbled from shadows into the moonlight. He broke into a shambling run. Terror in that movement, Terreton saw at once. Of what could Tick be afraid? He was not long in doubt. Flame jabbed from the shadows, twice. Tick hesitated. He jerked up his gun and returned the fire.

But he had been hit. He wavered. Fury surged within Terreton. His gun blazed in the direction of the ambusher's shot, and though he had no mark to judge results by he seemed to come close, for there was a wild yell of alarm, a lower-voiced oath, and a man doubled around the corner of the house, his thin body for an instant revealed in the moonglow.

Nolm! Terreton darted after him. His gun flamed again, but Messner's henchman was a too-wavering figure for even an expert marksman to hit. He ran out over the open prairie, sprang into the saddle of a waiting horse, and raced from sight.

Terreton turned back to Tick. The little man was lying flat in the dust, his labored breathing apparent yards away. Terreton had heard sounds like that before.

"What's this all about, Tick?" he asked gently, lifting the puncher's white head out of the dust.

"I heard a sound while back, boss. Woke me up. I went out to see what it was an' thet hombre was there. He was sneakin' down to the bunkhouse. Aimed to git you, I reckon! He saw me, an' opened fire, an' I shot back at him. Then he ducked. By that time you was awake. You yelled. Wal, I—I reckon thet's all fer me!"

Terreton was going to make some false remark of optimism, but Tick cut him off. His voice was weak, but vibrated with a last energy.

"Hear thet rumble, boss? Y' know what it is? Cows! Thet herd is bein' driven over here. They crossed the river. I—I reckon yore bargain wasn't much good, far as thet girl's concerned, boss!"

Terreton's heart shook in wrath more terrible than any fury he had ever experienced in his hot-tempered life before. Tick's words were confirmation of the suspicion which had slowly rose within him, in spite of his efforts to deny it.

"You think she fooled me? She didn't ever mean to keep her bargain?" he demanded.

"I ain't sayin', boss! You love her, I reckon, an' I can't say nothin' against a woman you love—"

He stiffened. He coughed violently. Then all sound about him ceased, forever. Terreton lifted him and carried him into the house. Then from the wall he took down the Winchester which his father had brought from Oregon, and with lips grimly set went down to the corral, where he saddled a horse, to set out in the direction of the herd.

A woman had driven his father from Oregon, had accomplished his father's downfall. Today, Malheur Terreton's old hatred of women had wavered, to almost vanish when Tara Rothas had looked at him. Here at last was a girl who was refutation of his doubts.

He heard himself laugh. She had seen the danger her three riders were in, no doubt, and had taken the means she did to protect them. For Terreton would have killed one or more of them if they had resisted his order to move. She had played him for a fool, with a false bargain to allay his suspicions until a good time to move across upon his range.

Bitterness to him, all this. But he could not believe it, though it was coldly logical. He must have proof. Surely she was not what she appeared! He must have definite proof he told himself. And meanwhile—

The Rothas herd would stop and turn back!

The herd had stopped. At the rear the moonlight glinted from the white canvas of a camp wagon, drawn by a team of horses. The pair of animals drooped their heads, in apparent sleep. The steers moved uneasily. Some of them were bedding down. Over everything there was the impression of waiting, tense waiting.

Terreton glimpsed no men. He rode forward boldly, but warily, alert for ambush.

He circled the herd before he glimpsed the figure leaning against one wheel of the wagon. His heart leaped. He recognized her at once in the moonlight, and had to hold himself to keep from rushing headlong forward. He slipped from his horse, and with rifle in hand went onward step by step, his eyes shifting from side to side but without glimpse of the three men. At last he stood close beside her.

"Tara!" he said.

She jerked upright, faced him with her back to the wheel, her face gleaming white in the moonglow. There seemed to be terror in her pose.

"Tara, what's the idea?" Terreton asked slowly. "You promised you'd keep your herd south of the river. An' here it is now. One of your men tried to kill me a while back. He did kill one of my riders!"

There was no doubt about the terror that swayed her now. Terreton saw her lick her red lips. Her throat quivered, and her voice shook so that it could hardly be understood.

"Terreton, I—I— Please believe me, Terreton! I didn't want to drive that herd across—"

Terreton took a step forward. Surprise rushed through him. And relief. Here was her confirmation of what he believed her to be.

"Tara, what is it? What's happened?"

"Oh, Terreton—"

Her eyes were wide with terror. But they were not fixed on Terreton's face. They seemed to look beyond him. And involuntarily he turned, in a defensive gesture. But without alarm. His heart was singing—a song that died, crashed, when he made sure there was nobody behind and turned to face Tara again. For from behind the girl, pressed close to her side, a gun gleamed. Held by someone behind her.

"All right, drop thet rifle!" Messner snapped.

He followed the gun out. At the same instant Logdell and Nolm appeared. Three guns gleamed wickedly! The trio had been hidden under the wagon.

"Good work, Tara!" Messner applauded. "After Nolm botchin' the job tonight, I figgered Terreton'd be along! An' I didn't aim to take no more risk than I had to! I knew he'd come up to you right pronto, an' prob'ly git plumb careless, which he did! Yore lookin' beyond him was a good trick, Tara. I got to hand it to you!"

"Hidin' behind a woman an' usin' her fer a shield!" Terreton said in harsh contempt.

"Shore! Why not?"

Terreton became cold as ice, with a kind of frozen fury which he held leashed. He'd lost nothing, he decided. The girl had turned out as he'd expected. Making a fool of him this afternoon—making a fool of him tonight! As his father had been made a fool of.

"Wal, Miss Rothas, I shore got to hand it to you!" he said. "You're a nice little actress! I'd have sworn for a minute there you were scared. But I reckon it was just play-actin' to get me off my guard."

Tara took a step forward. She was quivering, trembling. She had been afraid, Terreton thought in contempt —afraid of his gun, of his father's Winchester.

"Terreton, I'm—I'm not responsible for this—"

"Shut up!" Messner interrupted. He backed her roughly away, so that she was concealed from Terreton behind his big body. "Terreton, I reckon you know what's comin' to you! I warned you this afternoon!"

He glanced around, at last fixing his gaze on Nolm. "Reckon you better do the job!" he suggested.

"Shore!" Nolm said eagerly. "I feel like a little shootin' tonight, anyway!"

"Then git goin'! We'll push the cattle a couple of miles on before we bed down permanent, while yo're takin' care of Terreton. Down by the willows along the river is the best place, I reckon. Be shore yuh git rid of him!" He removed his cigar and opened his big mouth to laugh. "Haw! Haw! Wal, Horse Heaven belongs to this outfit from now on!"

Terreton went slowly to his horse, climbed into the saddle, and with Nolm, gun in hand, close behind him, headed towards the river. Towards death. He looked back once—to stare with electric shock straight into Tara's moon-bathed face. She was crying. At a word from Messner, she turned away.

Terreton heard himself laugh. She was no different from the rest. But there was a vast, aching void inside him which his fury towards her did not completely fill.

Terreton was riding a little in advance of Nolm, who held his gun in his hand. Any moment now Terreton expected to feel the choking thrust of lead through him. Then he remembered that Messner had named the willow brakes along the river as the place of execution, and realized that he still had a short period of life left him.

Not that he expected to die if he could help it. Far from that! Through him burned the flame of vengeance, against the girl who had tricked him and against the three men who drove cattle into this horse country at her orders. He shifted to look back, but at Nolm's curt command resumed his steady scrutiny of the country ahead, which presently broke into coulees and then levelled out into a valley of willow brakes, through the center of which the river flowed.

"Wal, here's the place!" Nolm said.

"Yeh, here's the place!" Terreton echoed.

"Don't appear to be scared!" Nolm remarked. "I reckon I got to hand it to you, Terreton! Yo're dangerous an' you ain't scared! You ain't scared even now, I reckon, an' in another ten minutes you'll be plumb dead!"

He took pleasure in his killing, evidently. Terreton, not daring to look back, could sense that he was raising his gun, making ready to fire. He tensed and slipped his boots free of the stirrups. There would be a slight click of metal before he fired.

It came. Terreton hurled himself from the saddle. The bullet whistled where he had been. His horse bolted violently into the willows. He had gauged his leap, calculated where he would land, and he landed on his feet, crouched to spring. He sprang back at Nolm like a cougar.

The man's gun blazed in his face, but his attack frightened the horse, and due to the animal's uneasy motions the bullet went wild. Terreton caught hold of Nolm's leg and heaved mightily. Nolm fought to retain his balance. His gun blazed again, and as harmlessly as before. He began to slip from the saddle. His horse shifted out from under him and he crashed into the willows, with Terreton astride him.

But he still held onto the gun with bulldog tenacity. And he proved, for all his lack of muscular development, amazingly slippery. He eeled out from under Terreton and staggered to his feet. He lifted his gun. His eyes were wild—the eyes of a desperately scared, cornered coyote.

"So you figgered to kill me!" Terreton gritted.

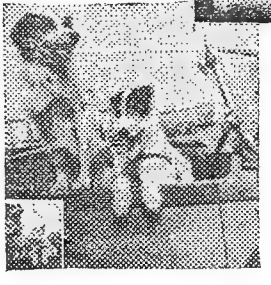
(Continued on page 122)

Regular $1.00 Photo Enlargement FREE

The publisher of this magazine makes you this generous offer! He will send you a size 8x10 enlargement of any snapshot on high grade Buff Portrait paper. The enlargement will be clear, beautiful and life-like—will look like an expensive original photograph—and will not fade.

This offer is being made to cooperate with manufacturers of nationally known merchandise that you buy at your dealers every day. All you have to do is send a box top or wrapper or descriptive literature of one of the products listed on this page—kindly enclose with your box top or wrapper 25c to help cover the cost of packing, handling, wrapping, mailing, etc. The enlargement we send is the kind you will expect to pay $1.00 for in a high-class store. Send any good, clear snapshot—we do not need the negative—send bust, full length, groups, Dad, Mother, baby, sister, sweetheart, animals, pets, baseball or football team or any subject. We send you an 8x10 photo enlargement from any clear photo or tintype. WE GUARANTEE TO RETURN ORIGINALS IN PERFECT CONDITION.

See the list of nationally known products on this page—look them over now! Go to your dealer and purchase the items you need—enclose a box top or wrapper or descriptive literature for each picture and 25c for each picture you want enlarged—you must be delighted or your money will be refunded in full.



Below you will find a list of nationally known products that are sold by your local dealer. Go to your regular store and purchase one or more of these products, and send us the box tops with 25c for each enlargement wanted, and receive your 8x10 $1.00 value photo enlargement postpaid.

Barbasol Shaving Cream	Alka Seltzer
Lifebuoy Shaving Cream	Bromo Seltzer
Listerine (Also Cough Drops)	
Palmolive Shaving Cream	Forhan Toothpaste
Colgate Dental Cream	Star Razor Blades
Mennen's Shaving Cream	Probak Razor Blades
Vick's (Vapo Rub or Cough Drops)	
Ironized Yeast	Aspirin / Ex-Lax

Rush Coupon →

This offer is made for a limited time only—the publisher of this magazine wants to prove the great reader interest and buying power of the readers of this magazine. This, your favorite magazine, wants your cooperation. Send your box tops or wrappers or descriptive literature today—NOW. Don't forget to enclose 25c to help cover the cost of packing, handling, wrapping and mailing for each box top or wrapper you enclose for enlargement—and remember the publisher of this magazine guarantees that you will be delighted and 100% satisfied or your money will be refunded—RUSH COUPON.

MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS, INC. Photo Dept.
69 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

I accept your special offer. Enclosed find. . . box tops or wrappers of products listed in your special offer advertisement. I enclose $..... in full payment. It is understood that you will send to me at once the 8x10 enlargements and return my originals in perfect condition.

Name..... Age.....

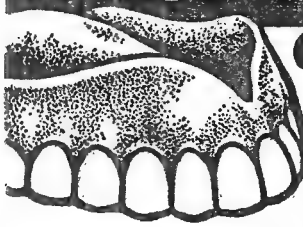
Street .....

City..... State.....

Is this the first time you bought the product of which you are enclosing the box top or wrapper? YES..... NO.....

Occupation.....

FALSE TEETH



60 DAYS TRIAL

Thousands of my satisfied customers all over the country know there is **no need to pay big prices.** I have been making dental plates for many years, by mail, and I have saved my customers thousands of dollars. Besides, I guarantee you satisfaction or they do not cost you one cent, and I take your word. Teeth made especially for you personally can be tried for sixty days. In one Pennsylvania town alone, 91 people are wearing teeth made by me, satisfied they have better teeth and saved money.

SEND NO MONEY

My plates are very beautiful to look at and are constructed to give life-long service and satisfaction. You can look years younger at once. They are made with pearly white genuine porcelain teeth. Well fitting and guaranteed unbreakable. Remember you do not send **FREE** one cent—just your name and address, and we send free impression material and full detailed directions. Be sure to write today for my low prices and complete information. Don't put this off. Do it today.

DR. S. B. HEININGER, D. D. S.
440 W. Huron St., Dept. 665, Chicago, Illinois

FREE How To Secure A Government Position

Tells About These and Other Positions

RAILWAY POSTAL CLERKS $1850 to $2700 a year
POSTMASTER $1200 to $2500 a year
POST OFFICE CLERK $1700 to $2100 a year
R. F. D. MAIL CARRIER $1800 to $2300 a year

FREE BOOK tells how I can help you get a Government Job. For 8 years I was Civil Service Examiner—have helped thousands. If citizen 18 to 50, you may qualify. Get ready NOW for a government position. Send for free book. Write or mail coupon TODAY.

A. R. PATTERSON, Patterson School, 232 Case Bldg., Rochester, N.Y.
Please send me your free book "How to Secure a Government Position."

Name .....

Address .....

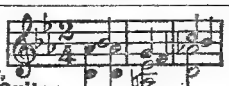
EPILEPSY—EPILEPTICS!

Detroit lady finds relief for husband after specialists home and abroad failed. All letters answered.

MRS. GEO. DEMPSTER
Apt. G 6900 Lafayette Blvd., West Detroit, Mich.

YOUNG WOMEN! YOUNG MEN! Join world wide fraternity of pen pals, hobby pals, collectors of stamps, coins, souvenirs. Low dues include monthly magazine, publicity that brings shower of letters, frat pin, etc. Send stamp today for details and free lithographed copy of The I. X. D. Girl in beautiful colors. Richard Murdoc, c/o IOTA XI DELTA, 416 S. Dearborn St., (Suite 320), Chicago, Ill., U. S. A.

LEARN



Piano, Violin, Cornet, Trumpet, Mandolin, Guitar, Banjo, Organ, Accordion, Saxophone, Clarinet

EASY HOME METHOD—new, fast way for beginners. Makes you accomplished in amazingly short time. 300,000 enthusiastic students. Low cost; easy terms. Satisfaction guaranteed. **Free** Catalog gives full details.

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC
Dept. 724 1525 East 53rd Street, Chicago

He hurled himself forward and Nolm went down under the impact of his crushing force. This time the gun slipped from his hand. It landed at the base of a clump of willows. The two men scrambled for it together. Terreton got there first. His palm clenched over the cold metal; he lifted himself upright, swung about, at the same time pressing the trigger.

Flame lashed out, dimming the moonglow. But only for an instant. Half Nolm's head seemed to have dissolved. He fell forward among the willows—dead. Silence dropped, all the more intense after the noise of the struggle.

Terreton leaned down and lifted the man's hat from where it had fallen. It was an unusual, plug-topped affair which would mark anybody. Terreton had the glimmer of a plan. He hoped that hat would mark him as Nolm, that under the disguise of it he might ride within striking distance of Messner and Logdell—and Tara Rothas.

He tried not to think too much as he loaded the gun with which he'd just killed Nolm, and mounted the man's horse. He tried to keep his fury cold, frozen, held in, but at times it burned forth and then he trembled as with an ague.

But he controlled it when he overtook the herd. It had paused again, this time evidently for the night. The horses had been unhitched from the wagon, and a fire burned beside it. Three figures beside the fire—Messner and Logdell. And Tara. She huddled there in the light of the flames, something of misery in her pose. Terreton's heart speeded. Then deliberately he stilled it to a normal emotion.

For Tara Rothas, like Messner and Logdell, had been marked for death. The fury which was a part of him now knew but one outlet: To kill! Three lives. Two men—one a woman. A woman he had loved. Still loved, perhaps. But that did not matter—

she was no better, now, than Messner and Logdell.

Logdell strode abruptly out into the light beyond the fire; Terreton could see him, in the bright moonglow, fussing with the staked horses a hundred yards beyond camp. On foot, Terreton slunk forward. Rage throbbed through him, but did not blind him, nor did it dim his caution. He slipped swiftly forward like a shadow. This attack must be sudden, unexpected—and silent, so that the pair back by the fire would not be alarmed.

Logdell saw the hat, and assumed what Terreton had planned—that this was Nolm returning from the kill. He continued his inspection of a horse's split hoof, and flung over his shoulder, "Back, eh? Wal, I hope yuh did a good, clean job. Throwed him in the river, didn't yuh?"

"Shore!" Terreton returned muffling his voice in his hand.

But his simulation of the dead killer's voice was unsuccessful. Logdell stiffened, to swing about and up in quick alarm.

"Hell's bells, you ain't Nolm!" he jerked out, reaching for his gun.

"Not Nolm! Malheur Terreton!"

Terreton flung himself forward. With a sudden twist, he jerked the gun from Logdell's hand, and flung it off beyond the staked circle of horses. His fingers closed on Logdell's Adam's apple, throttling his outcry of alarm. He bore him down; clenched together, they rolled under the horse's belly, by a miracle missed the animal's alarmed lashing of hoofs, and ended up in a clump of sage.

Like Nolm, Logdell proved amazingly slippery and lithe. It was even more difficult to deal with him because Terreton had to keep one hand on the man's throat to keep him soundless. Terreton had a moment's panic at the thought that the two at the fire might detect this commotion, and the thought gave him a resurgence of strength. He managed to get his

Arrest Him, Officer!

I'LL HAVE COMPLETE FACTS ON THE OTHER FELLOW TONIGHT!

Follow This Man!

SECRET Service Operator No. 38 is on the job... *follow him* through all the excitement of his chase after the counterfeit gang. See how a crafty operator works. Tell-tale finger prints in the murdered girl's room that help him solve the great mystery! BETTER than fiction because every word is TRUE. No obligation. Just mail me the coupon and get—

FREE **The Confidential Reports No. 38 Made to His Chief**

And the best part of it all is this—it may open your eyes to the great opportunity for YOU as a well paid Finger Print Expert. This is a young, *fast-growing* profession. The kind of work you would like. Excitement! Thrills! Travel! *A regular monthly salary.* Reward money. *And remember:* graduates of this school HEAD 47% of *all* Identification Bureaus in the U. S. Quick! Mail the Coupon NOW and I'll send you these Free Confidential Reports!

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 746A Chicago, Illinois

Institute of Applied Science
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 746A Chicago, Illinois

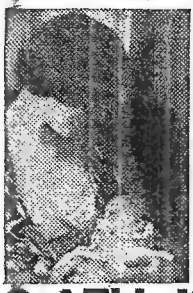
Gentlemen:—Without any obligation whatsoever, send me the Reports of Operator No. 38, also your illustrated Free Book on Finger Prints and your low prices and Easy Terms Offer. Literature will NOT be sent to boys under 17 years of age.

Name _____

Address _____

_____ *Age* _____

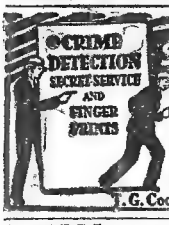
Do You Want A Baby?



HUNDREDS upon hundreds of women from Coast to Coast, formerly childless for years from functional sterility, and even often told they could never have children, ARE NOW PROUD AND HAPPY MOTHERS from knowledge and use of a simple home method—details of which I send FREE on request. Parents are admittedly far happier, healthier, more contented, more prosperous and actually live longer as a class than childless couples! A baby gives the real home spirit and ties a husband and wife in truest enduring love and mutual interests. The majority of discontented, unhappy marriages are those of childless couples.

Get This Knowledge FREE

During my 36 years of practice in functional conditions of women I developed this home method, which is described in my illustrated treatise sent FREE ON REQUEST. It discusses many subjects relating to the female organs and tells how you too may combat your troubles as thousands of others have who reported arrival of babies after being childless for years, and report as well satisfactory relief from the various female troubles amenable to correction by this home method. DR. H. WILLELDERS, 7th & Felix Sts., Suite 1431-F, ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI.



SECRET SERVICE BOOK FREE

Sent For 30 Days Reading

No Money Down—Actual Crime Cases—

If You Act Quick!—We will send you this stirring book on Crime Detection, Secret Service and Identification Work for 30 days free reading. Send no money. If you decide to keep it, then send only $1.00. If not, return it. WRITE TODAY. Not sent to boys under 17 years of age.

T. G. Cooke, Dept. A-746, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Chicago

NEW POCKET CAMERA FREE

Developing set (Includes films, fixing and developing powders, glass top printing frame, and complete directions) given with purchase of this brand new pocket size camera just placed on the market. Be your own photographer. Develop and take your own snapshots with this wonderful little camera. Send for your complete camera set now.

SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER $1.00 POSTPAID

SHUPE BOX 928, PROVIDENCE, R. I.

WANTED ORIGINAL POEMS SONGS

For Immediate Consideration.

M.M.M. PUBLISHERS, Dept. MP, Studio Bldg., Portland, Ore.

LONELY HEARTS

Join our Club. World's Greatest Social Extension Bureau. Happiness awaits you, correspondents everywhere, seeking congenial mates. Quick results. Confidential service. Particulars FREE.

STANDARD CLUB, Box C, GRAYSLAKE, ILLINOIS

SENSATIONAL SALE—BELOW COST

Brand new, guaranteed and tested imported arms.

Model 12 POLICE SPECIAL

Swing-out cylinder, hand ejector, front latch, 6 shot, double action. Sturdily constructed; fine blued steel; rubber stocks. Calibers 32, 32/20 & 38, in 4", 5" & 6" barrels. Regular price, $9.95. Sale price, any caliber..... $7.45

AUTOMATICS: Model 066; blued steel, accurate, hard hitting; durable; single safety. 25 cal., vest pocket size; wt., 14 oz.; 4½" overall—Special, $5.95. 32 cal., $6.85.

HOLSTERS: Automatics, 70c; Revolver, 95c; Shoulder, $1.75; Cartridges: Automatic, 25 cal., 65c; 32 cal., 75c box 25. Revolver, 32 cal., $1.00; 32/20 & 38, $1.50 per 50.

[$2 Deposit required on COD's] Clip this adv., enclose M.O.—Quantity Limited—ORDER TODAY!

LEE SALES CO., (Dept. MP), 35 W. 32d St., N. Y. City

BE A PASSENGER Traffic Inspector

A Good Position Will Be Ready for You

RELIABLE, TRAINED MEN—19 to 50—are wanted now as *Railway and Bus Passenger Traffic Inspectors*. Short, home-study course qualifies you and upon completion, we place you at up to $135 per month, plus expenses, to start, *or refund tuition*. Rapid advancement with experience. Free Booklet outlines our 17-year record.

Standard Business Training Institute, Div. 8306, Buffalo, N. Y.

gun out. Logdell heaved from under him. His mouth opened to yell, but before sound came, the gun crashed down along the side of his head. Blood spurted. A second time Terreton smashed the weapon forward, and after the second blow Logdell fell and did not rise again.

He twitched for a minute, then stilled. The moonlight flooded over his body, but his smashed face and head were in the shadow of the brush. The hot smell of blood surged up to combine with the aroma of crushed sage, and for an instant Terreton sickened. But only for an instant. He darted a look towards the fire. The two there did not appear to be alarmed. Evidently they attributed this disturbance down here to the horses.

"An' now for Messner an'—Tara Rothas!"

With the bandanna around his neck he wiped the grip of his gun clean of the greasy blood, reversed it into his palm, and slunk on noiseless boots around the herd towards the fire and the camp wagon. He approached the girl and Messner so that his course was concealed by the stained-white canvas roof of the vehicle. Step by step he crept on. There must be no hitch now, no overplaying of his hand; he must take the pair by utter surprise. As he'd taken Logdell.

There was a joke here, a joke Terreton was going to enjoy—Messner and Tara thought him dead, but here he was alive. He was going to enjoy that joke. He was going to appreciate the look of surprise on their faces before he shot them down.

"Tara Rothas!" he whispered to himself, in a tone of loathing, but for his life he could not have kept out of it an undertone of sorrow.

He was next to the wagon now. He crept forward inch by inch, around it, until he stood in the shadows opposite the rear of it, where he could stare unseen right into the fire and directly at Messner and Tara.

Tara was on the ground, her head bowed in her arms, her hair flooding down over her in an expression of grief and terror which Terreton believed could not be real. But then he heard Messner's slow, dry voice.

"Wal, Tara, reckon you might as well face it! You fell fer thet Malheur Terreton, an' you were plumb set against actin' as bait when we wanted to get him, but he's dead now, an' that's all there is to it! Tara, ever since I hired out to you as foreman I been figgerin' we might git hitched up some time! Ferget this Terreton an' marry me!"

"Now," the girl said in a dead voice, "that you've taken the herd from me, driven into Terreton country, killed Terreton, you think— Oh, I should have known!" she cried, in a resurgence of fury that jerked her head upright. "I should have known that you and Logdell and Nolm were snakes! I should have known that you planned all along to rustle my herd! I should have known that before tonight! But I—"

Terreton felt sweat break out on his face. Slowly the killer's mania which had marked Tara Rothas as its victim dissolved, but it found fresh flame in Terreton's hatred of Messner.

"You ain't got much choice!" Messner said. "We took yore herd tonight, an' did what we aimed to do, an' thet was to drive into Horse Heaven. I sent Nolm to git Terreton but he blundered, an' we had to stop the herd an' git him by usin' you as bait. Wal, thet's all over. Terreton's dead. You ain't got much choice! I'm offerin' to marry you! But if you won't—"

Slowly, his thick lips split in a smile, while he took the cigar butt from his mouth and stared at it.

"No choice!" repeated Tara dully.

"Reckon not! I don't want to throw you into the river, alongside the hombre you was admirin' today, an' I don't aim to if I can help it! But if yuh git to actin' stubborn an' uppity—"

FOR A LIMITED TIME

FREE TUBE

With Each Order for Two Tires

GOODYEAR
GOODRICH - FISK
FIRESTONE - U. S.
And All Other Makes

Astounding Tire Bargains, unequalled and unbeatable elsewhere, on Standard Brands. Every tire repaired by our improved method and by skilled experts. 20 years of experience assures superior product. THOUSANDS OF USERS throughout the U. S. A. say our tires GIVE LONG, SATISFACTORY SERVICE. ORDER NOW! DON'T WAIT!—Get a Brand New Circular Molded Tube absolutely FREE with each two tires ordered. Offer good limited time.

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.35	.85
30x4.50-21	2.40	.85
28x4.75-19	2.45	.95
29x4.75-20	2.50	.95
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
5.25-17	2.90	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.95	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
6.00-17	3.40	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35
6.00-16	3.75	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	$0.75	33x4½	$3.45	$1.15
31x4	2.95	.85	34x4½	3.45	1.15
32x4	2.95	.85	30x5	3.65	1.35
33x4	2.95	.85	33x5	3.75	1.45
34x4	3.25	.85	35x5	3.95	1.55
32x4½	3.35	1.15			

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95	34x7	$10.95	$3.95
33x5	3.95	1.45	38x7	10.95	3.95
34x5	4.25	2.00	36x8	11.45	3.95
32x6	7.95	2.75	40x8	13.25	4.15
36x6	9.95	3.95			

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
5.00-20	$3.75	$1.65	7.50-20	$6.95	3.75
6.50-20	4.45	1.95	8.25-20	8.95	4.05
7.00-20	5.95	2.95	9.00-20	10.95	5.65
			9.75-20	13.95	6.45

ALL OTHER SIZES

DEALERS WANTED

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. ($4.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct **5 per cent** if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED—HEAVY GAUGE CIRCULAR MOLDED. Guard against price advances. Order Now. **We agree to replace at half price any tire failing to give 9 months' service.**

PERRY-FIELD TIRE & RUBBER CO.
2328-30 S. Michigan Ave. Dept. 1585-A, Chicago, Ill.

FOREST JOBS

available at $125-$175 per month, steady. Cabin. Hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify at once.
Get details immediately
Rayson Service Bureau, B-55, Denver, Colo.

BECOME A SUCCESSFUL **DETECTIVE**

Earn Big Money—Travel—Experience Unnecessary. Free Detective Paper and Particulars. Write NATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM, Dept. 425-D, Fremont, Nebraska, U. S. A.

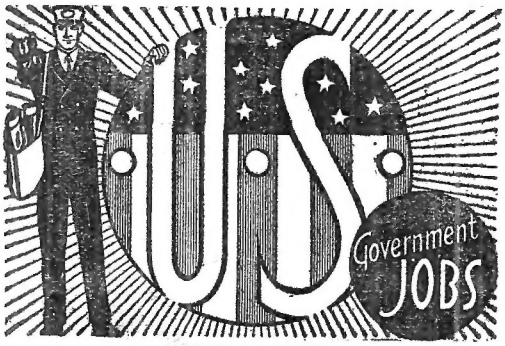
LONELY?

Join a National Church Organization. Sure to have a select helpmate for you. Stamp and age bring full particulars. REV. JONES, P. O. Box 2459, Kansas City, Mo.

STRANGE TRANSPARENT PORTRAIT
From ANY SNAPSHOT

SHOW mysterious sample to your friends and make money taking orders for the smash hit of the year. Impossible to describe—hard to believe even when you see it, a sensational new invention makes any snapshot into large 8x10 Portrait that looks and wears like transparent porcelain (glossy, indestructible). Big Commissions—Many Repeat Sales. Don't send money—just send name. We'll tell you FREE how and where to see sample and get your picture without extra charge.

LIFETIME PORTRAIT SOCIETY, Dept. 376
1037 Evans St. Cincinnati, Ohio



START
$1260 to $2100 YEAR

MEN—WOMEN
Get Ready Immediately.
Common Education Usually Sufficient.

Mail Coupon Today—SURE

COUPON

Franklin Institute
Dept. J-251
ROCHESTER, N. Y.

Gentlemen: Rush to me, FREE of charge, list of U.S. Government big pay jobs. Send me FREE 32-page book describing salaries, vacations, hours, work, and telling what to do to get one of these jobs.

Name .....

Address .....

QUIT USING TOBACCO!
Write for Free Booklet and Learn How. Results Guaranteed or Money Refunded.
NEWELL PHARMACAL COMPANY
117 Clayton Station St. Louis, Mo.

100,000 Satisfied Users

GET ACQUAINTED CLUB
Confidential introductions by letter. Members in every State seeking congenial mates. Many wealthy. If lonely, write
R. E. SIMPSON, Box 1251, DENVER, COLO.

CASH for EASY HOMEWORK

LADIES—ADDRESS ENVELOPES—
at home. Spare time. $5.00 — $15.00 weekly. Experience unnecessary. Dignified work. Send stamp for particulars.
HAWKINS
Dept. 57, Box 75, Hammond, Indiana

WORLD'S WONDROUS TREASURED GUARD RING

People from all parts of the world have treasured this jewel through the centuries. The CRUCIFIX ring was created by a GOLDSMITH in Spain. Admired by all who see and wear it. Mrs. Klodney writes: "The CRUCIFIX ring is the envy of my friends. It has brought me much good luck, happiness, etc." You can own this beautiful Sterling Silver Jewel. SEND NO MONEY. Send name and address and strip of paper showing finger size. When postman delivers your CRUCIFIX RING pay him only $1.89. Wear it seven days. If not delighted, money refunded. Write now!
Y. BEDEVERE, Box 33, Station Y, Brooklyn, N. Y.
May Good Luck Be With You

Tara came to her feet. Her eyes gleamed in the firelight. She was a slight, tense figure there where shadows, fire-flame, and silver-glow met.

"Messner, here's my answer!" she said clearly. "No! I won't marry you! You've taken everything I had, but you can't have me! Today, for the first time in my life, I met a man I felt I loved! But you—" her voice faltered.

Then it rushed on violently. "You made him hate me! You forced me to act as bait to draw him into your trap! He went to his death hating me! I saw his eyes when he looked back at me as Nolm took him away!"

Worlds seemed to collide about Terreton's head. Shame, burning shame, filled him—shame that he should ever have thought her false. That he should have judged her by what his conception of all womanhood was.

"Messner, I—I'll die before—"

"You've had yore chance!" Messner said, and now he was not smiling any more. "I reckon you mean what you say. Wal, mebby you'll change yore mind if I choke thet pretty throat of yores a little!"

He replaced the cigar in the corner of his mouth and took a step forward. Tara backed against a wheel of the wagon, as once before tonight she had backed in terror.

"Jest a minute, Messner!" Terreton said, stepping into the firelight.

He remembered that this was to be a joke, and he had his satisfaction now in the look of vast surprise and horror on Messner's face. But instantly the man recovered. His hand crept down to his gun.

"What the devil's happened? How come yo're here?" he snarled.

"Nolm fell down on the job again. I killed him. A little while back, down at the horses, I killed Logdell!" Terreton said, without emotion. "Yo're the only one who's left, Messner! The only one!"

Deliberately, he forced his eyes to keep from the girl. She was not of this moment—this instant of death. Death hovered in the calm air, in the firelight, in Messner's eyes, and in the gleam of the gun in Terreton's hand.

"Wal, Messner?" Terreton challenged.

"I said I'd git you, Terreton! I still mean it!"

The man's hand jabbed down, came up so viciously swift that the muzzle of his gun had cleared the holster before Terreton could haul back on the trigger of his Colt. Three times the guns roared, the shots blending into one continuous thunder of sound and burst of flame. Lead whistled in Terreton's ear. Then Messner shook; his hands came up, groped, while the gun dropped to the ground. The cigar tumbled from the corner of his mouth. His face contorted, then seemed to freeze. His knees buckled; his body staggered, crumpled forward so that he pitched flat upon his face, where he twitched momentarily before quieting.

Terreton went to Tara. She came to meet him, and as if by instinct his arms went around her, and held her tightly while her shoulders shook with the violence of her tears.

"You heard him?"

"Tara, I heard everythin'!" Terreton said. "I was a fool, Tara! I thought you guilty, because I'd been thinkin' that that was the way of women. But I—I reckon it ain't. I reckon you've given me another point of view!"

"I saw your eyes when Nolm took you to the river!" the girl said. "You were terrible! You hated me!"

"But I thought— But what I thought doesn't matter any more, Tara! Messner, Nolm, Logdell—they're dead now! They won't bother you any more! An' I reckon thet Horse Heaven, from now on, is goin' to have cattle on it. Your cattle!"

"Yours and mine!" Tara said through her tears.

NEVER TOOK A LESSON FROM A TEACHER

—yet Bob is the envy of his music-loving friends

You, too, can learn to play any instrument this amazingly simple way. No expensive teacher. No tiresome exercises or practicing. You learn at home, in your spare time. Yet almost before you know it you are playing real tunes! Then watch the invitations roll in — see how popular you become. Yet the cost is only a few cents a day.

EASY METHOD

You don't have to be "talented." You can't be too young or too old. No teacher to make you nervous. Course is thorough, rapid, simple as A-B-C. First you are *told* what to do—then a picture *shows* you how to do it—then you *do* it yourself and *hear* it. In a short time you become the envy of your friends, the life of every party.

LEARN TO PLAY BY NOTE
Piano, Violin, Guitar, Saxophone, Drum, Ukulele, Tenor Banjo, Hawaiian Guitar, Piano Accordion Or Any Other Instrument

DEMONSTRATION LESSON FREE!

Send for Free Demonstration Lesson, together with big free booklet which gives you details and proof that will astound you. No obligation. Write letter or postcard today. **Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.**

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
4346 Brunswick Bldg., New York City, N. Y.

"LIBERTY"
10 SHOT AUTOMATIC .25 CAL.

The smallest size automatic, with largest magazine capacity—10 shots. Side safety; proof tested; $7.95. Vest Pocket 7 Shot Liberty Auto., side safety, proof tested. $7.95. Holster 60c. Box of Cartridges 65c. *Write for catalog of Rifles, Guns, Colts, S.&W. Binoculars, etc. $2 Deposit required on C.O.D.'s*

$7.95

HUDSON SPORTING GOODS CO., 50 Warren St., New York

BEWITCH OTHERS

Make them love you. Wield powerful love control. Secure clever woman's private methods (confidential). Get secret charm. Revealing book, introducing you to new power, only 10c (sealed). GARDIN CO., Dept. 3449, Box 423, Madison Square Station, New York.

BE A DETECTIVE

Make Secret Investigations

Earn Big Money. Work home or travel. Fascinating work. Experience unnecessary. **DETECTIVE** Particulars FREE, Write to **GEO. T. G. WAGNER, 2640 Broadway, N.Y.**

Quit Tobacco

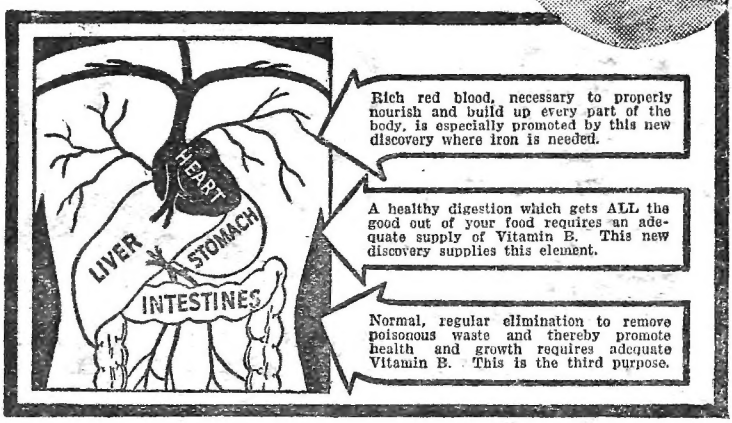
Don't try to banish unaided the hold tobacco has upon you. Thousands of inveterate tobacco users have, with the aid of the Keeley Treatment, found it easy to quit.

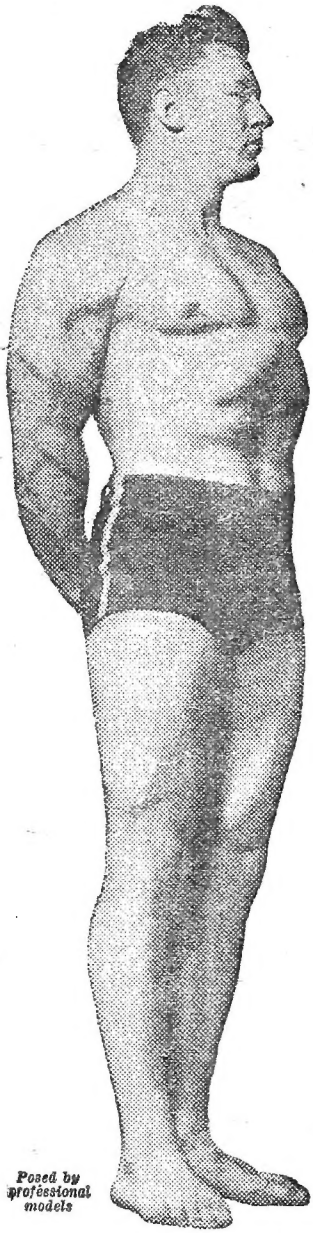
KEELEY TREATMENT FOR TOBACCO HABIT Quickly banishes craving for tobacco. Successful for over 60 years. Write today for FREE BOOK and our MONEY BACK GUARANTEE.

Home of the famous Keeley Treatment for Liquor and Drugs. Booklet sent on request. Correspondence strictly confidential.

KEELEY INSTITUTE, Dept. X-222, Dwight, Illinois

SCIENCE NOW PROVES THERE'S NO EXCUSE FOR THOUSANDS TO BE SKINNY





Posed by professional models

10 TO 25 LBS. GAINED QUICK—SAY THOUSANDS

NOW there's no need for thousands to be "skinny" and friendless, even if they never could gain an ounce before. Here's a new, easy treatment for them that puts on pounds of naturally attractive flesh—*in just a few weeks!*

Doctors now know that the real reason why many find it hard to gain weight is they do not get enough digestion-strengthening Vitamin B and blood-building iron in their daily food. Now with this new discovery which combines these two vital elements in little concentrated tablets, hosts of people have put on pounds of firm flesh—the women, normal curves—*in a very short time.*

Not only are thousands quickly gaining normal, good-looking pounds, but also naturally clear skin, freedom from indigestion and constipation, glorious new health and pep.

7 times more powerful

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from special cultured ale yeast imported from Europe, the richest known source of Vitamin B. By a new process this yeast is concentrated 7 times—*made 7 times more powerful.* Then it is ironized with 3 kinds of strengthening iron.

If you, too, need Vitamin B and iron to build you up, get these new Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist at once. Day after day, as you take them, watch skinny limbs and flat chest round out to normal attractiveness, skin clear to natural beauty—you're a new person.

Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and rundown you may be from lack of enough Vitamin B and iron, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands. If not delighted with results of very first package, your money instantly refunded.

Special FREE offer!

To start you building up your health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results guaranteed with very first package—*or money refunded.* At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 936, Atlanta, Ga.